

15¢



44 Western

MAGAZINE

SEPT.

**BUST 'ER TO
HELL-AN'-GONE!**

by **RALPH YERGEN**

**OVERHOLSER
SHAFFER
WEBBER
LANE**

AND OTHERS

**GUN-WATCH
ON THE
WISHBONE**

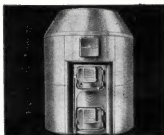
by **LEE
FLOREN**



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.44 Western

MAGAZINE

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Vol. 15

Contents for September, 1946

No. 3

- GUN-WATCH ON THE WISHBONE** **Lee Floren** 10
Wishbone cowmen and nesters were oiling up their .45's . . . For soon, to the beat of roaring flame and snarling slugs, that rich, once-peaceful range would dance the dead man's rigadood!
A Novel
- BOOTHILL'S BLOOD-MONEY** **James Shaffer** 30
Deputy Pete Calloway saw his \$1500 bounty-dream snatched from his grasp when he learned—the hard way—that his lawman boss was hell-on-the-kill!
Short Story
- PANHANDLE POWDERSMOKE SAGA** **Jhan Robbins** 39
With a fifteen-million dollar chunk of Texas' finest range in the jackpot, Panhandle ranchers made their ante in hot lead chips!
Fact Article
- TRAIL BLAZERS OF THE FRONTIER** **Cedric W. Windas** 43
Buffalo Bill's toughest fight for his life—and his hair!
Pictorial Feature
- ROLLING THE DEVIL'S FREIGHT** **Wayne D. Overholser** 44
Mike Malone, boom-camp logger, faced the gun-king of Gold Town and half a hundred hired killers, in his madman's try to bring freedom to the town that a gunsмоke Satan had enslaved!
Novellette
- TRAIL OF TALKING DEAD MEN** **M. Howard Lane** 56
The dead eyes of the bushwhacked 49-er flung an inescapable challenge at greenhorn Johnny King!
Short Story
- VULTURES OF THE VALLENCITO** **Roy Vandergoot** 63
Skeletons of those who made their losing desert gamble still keep their grim, golden secret!
- BOSS OF RUNNING-IRON RANCH** **Everett M. Webber** 66
It looked like Chuck was Lady Luck's favorite son when he inherited that lush rangeland. But he didn't count on the Winchester welcome that was dished out for the homecoming prodigal.
Novellette
- KILLER SWAP-OUT** **Ruel McDaniel** 76
Old Nevada Hobson staked his life in a cross-fire gamble between two quick-trigger gunmen!
Short Story
- BUST-ER-TO-HELL-AN'-GONE!** **Ralph Yergen** 80
The once-proud river queen's whistle sounded its psalm of doom—for both the packet and the war-necked skipper!
A Novel
- NORTH—TO HELL!** **J. Carroll** 8
John McDaniel's ruthless crew made the Sonora trace a hell-ride for traders
Fact Article
- .44 TALK** **The Editor** 6
Those old-time Western badmen lived—and died—true to their own code.
Department

NEXT ISSUE OUT AUGUST 21st!

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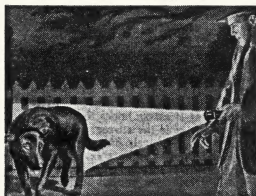
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★ .44 TALK ★

W E WON'T forget one night when the West came to New York. The Rodeo was in town, a bunch of us were sitting in one of those little places across from Madison Square Garden, having a beer with some of the boys with the show. Pete Wilson flung down the tabloid he'd been reading and stared at grizzled Doc across the table, who had, as he said, "just come along for the ride."

"Doc," he said, "what was it that spelled the difference between the Western badman of fifty years ago, and the criminal of today? Now take this 'Phantom Killer of Texarkana' I've just been reading about. He's not in the same league with Butch Cassidy and his Wild Bunch, the Daltons, or even with Billy the Kid, or any other big caliber outlaws of the past I can think of. How come?"

The old man looked at Pete thoughtfully for a moment. "If you asked me, I'd say most of the old-time badmen had what you might call a code. An' these modern renegades, they just don't stop at nothin'.

"Take any one of the desperados of yestiddy and stack 'em along side of one of these smart-aleck, city-bred thugs today, and the difference would be how they lived. Now you'd never catch an old-time badman sneakin' around bushwhackin' peaceable folks at night, like this 'Phantom'. It just wasn't in their book. And not even the worst outlaw would shoot down women in those days.

"What it boils down to is this: The renegade of the old days was too big a man to break the code of the West."

Old Doc really hit it on the head. Because, for our two-bits, the one word that personifies the old West is *big*. Not only were the outlaws adventurous and daring—the whole woof and warp of the West was *big*.

When a cattleman or a miner struck it rich, he counted his gold in outsized quantities. The XIT, the Hashknife, the King Ranch, and the other famous spreads were—and the latter outfit still is—awesomely big; they outstripped many a European country in size. When boom camps like Jackass Bar, Calico, Hangman's Gulch, or the end-of-steel cattle towns like old Dodge, Caldwell and others went on a Saturday night spree, modern-day New York or Gay Paree, or any other city you could men-

tion, would seem tame by comparison.

That was the Western story. It is still the Western heritage, the spirit of the West today. No twentieth century Texan or Californian or any other Westerner for that matter, speaks in the piddling terms of the East. The chief difference today is that the bigness of the modern West comes in more peaceful fashion. Today it's California oranges the size of pumpkins, or the Texan who can stand on the range and see all the way to next Tuesday and still be in Texas. Yes, indeed, the feeling is still there. . . .

And there was no lack of variety in those days, either. Some folks think that when you've told the story of the cowboy and the lone prairie and the badman, you've covered the whole panorama of the frontier. We believe 'tain't so. Such people don't know that Texas history and Oregon history are as different as any two stories you are likely to find. The thrilling, epic saga of the border states, in problems, in men, as in geography, is as different from the story of the winning of the Northwest as day is from night.

It is this variety, and this big, overall story that *.44 Western* hopes to bring you. Take, for example the current issue of *.44 Western*. In his novel, *Bust-Er-To-Hell-An'-Gone*, Ralph Yergen treats of steamboating along the turbulent Columbia River of the Northwest—a subject and an area Writer Yergen is thoroughly versed in. On the other hand, *The Trail of Talking Dead Men*, by M. Howard Lane is told against the colorful façade of California and the thrilling gold-rush days of '49. And so it goes.

If you want the whole story, the big story of the West, you can find it today, in all its high adventure, laughter and tragedy, human warmth and red-hot violence, in *Western* magazine fiction.

The next issue of *.44 Western* will be published August 21st!—THE EDITOR.

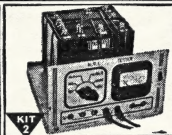


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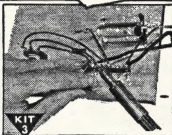
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6 Big Kits
of Radio Parts**



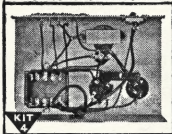
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I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



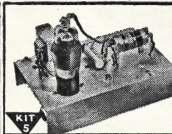
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KIT 3
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NORTH- TO HELL!

By J. Carroll

IN THE 1840's wealthy Mexican merchants, more than any others, suffered severely at the hands of organized bands of land pirates preying on the Santa Fe Trail. The marauders generally were Texans, or were led by Texans, who had an inherent hatred for all Sons of Sonora.

A particularly vicious band gathered in Westport, then a tough, bustling steamboat town on the frontier. Nine men in all, they were organized under John McDaniel, a Texan claiming a captaincy granted by his native government.

During the winter of 1842-43 there was an epidemic of pirates on the trail. Caravans leaving Santa Fe seldom could find escorts. Only when accompanied by U. S. troops on patrol were they safe. However, a few merchants risked the trip. One of them, Don Antonio José Chavez, a very wealthy Mexican doing a large scale business in Albuquerque, set out in February, 1843.

Chavez' movements and great wealth had been known to McDaniel for many months. Now he called in his band and schemed to strike in the Pawnee Bottoms skirting the Arkansas River. It was the most treacherous strip of all the winding trail, perfect for an ambush.

McDaniel ordered his cutthroats to slip out of Westport singly in order to conceal their intentions. Away from civilization the band reassembled and proceeded on their death-dealing mission.

McDaniel had calculated well, for the day after reaching Pawnee Fork, he spied the caravan crawling eastward. He waited far into the night. Then in the darkness he swooped down terribly, slaughtering the pleading Mexicans. Chavez he spared long enough to learn the whereabouts of his



hidden silver dollars, which were reported to have been worth about \$15,000. Eventually Chavez, too, was slain.

The customary practice was to kill all in a caravan, so there would remain no witnesses against the pirates. However, on this raid, one teamster succeeded in escaping and in a few days reaching Fort Leavenworth.

The post commander, on hearing the Mexican's story, ordered out a detachment of troops to track down the killers. Refreshed and mounted on a rested horse, the teamster guided the soldiers until they luckily met with John Hobbs and a number of buffalo hunters from Bent's Fort, all veteran plainsmen with excellent knowledge of the surrounding country. They gladly accepted the commanding officer's invitation to join in bringing the pirates to justice.

Four days later they sighted McDaniel's band. The outlaws, true to their character, frantically sought to escape. The posse gave heated chase and after a hard run closed in, sending a withering fire of rifle balls toward the fugitives. One pirate was killed, another's horse fell dead. The remainder, realizing the futility of their position, then surrendered.

The loot was recovered, and the eight living pirates were taken to St. Louis for trial. Some were sentenced to the gallows, and the others to long prison terms.

The wagon-trace from Mexico was paved with the bleached bones of bushwhacked Sonora traders . . . Who had taken their profit in lead—dished out, smoking hot, by the granddaddy of all trail pirates!

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1						11						23							27b				
1a						12						23a							27c				
1b						13						23b							27d				
1c						14						23c							28				
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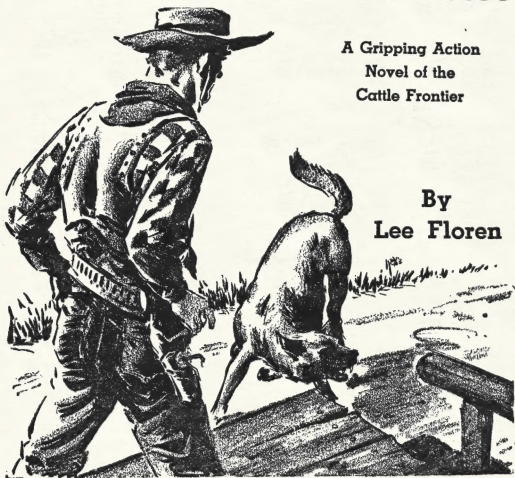
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Gun-Watch on the

A Gripping Action
Novel of the
Cattle Frontier

By
Lee Floren



CHAPTER ONE

Good Soil for a Grave

STEVE THOREN sat on the bunk and watched the sheriff and the stranger come down the cell-corridor. "This is the fellow, Strong," said Sheriff Harkness.

Strong was a big man, and Thoren felt the push of the cowman's gaze. "What's your name?" he asked.

Thoren told him.

Strong said, irritably, "Turn him loose, Sheriff."

Sheriff Harkness fumbled at the cell-lock with his key. "Damn it, Strong, I didn't know. He came in last night into Wishbone on a big gelding, and right off

he asks where you are. Me, I figured Jim Wing had hired him to kill you. So I jugged him pronto. He got a little rough and I had to trim him down some. Come on out, Thoren."

Martin Strong was smiling, the gesture thin. "Thanks for lookin' out for me, Harkness," he said dryly. He spoke to Thoren. "You'll have to overlook this, fellow. Harkness here thought you were a strange gunman hired by Jim Wing to cut me down."

Steve Thoren was a quiet, thin man of twenty-five. He buckled on his guns in the office and said smoothly, "You having trouble on this Wishbone River range?"

"Too much trouble," said Sheriff Harkness.

Thoren said, huskily, "There'll be more

Wishbone

Thoren's right drove in,
and Wing went back, flat
in the dust.



—now,” and he twisted Harkness, holding him by one shoulder. He sent his right fist pile-driving against the lawman’s jaw. Harkness went backwards, hit the wall, and sat down, spitting blood. Steve Thoren adjusted his guns correctly on his flat thighs.

“I don’t like men to come up behind me and stick a gun against me, Harkness,” he said.

Harkness spat again. “You’re under arrest, Thoren.”

Thoren said, “Enforce it.”

Harkness got to his feet. He wiped his mouth with his hand. Strong cut in with, “All right, Harkness. All right, Thoren. Call it off, now.”

Swallowed by the black maw of night, those stolen cattle thundered across Steve Thoren’s homestead and vanished into the dark. And all over that Wishbone Basin a leaden pall of suspicion settled, as cowmen and hoemen oiled their guns—preparing to reap a red, bitter harvest of bullet-shattered bodies, and flame-ravaged ranches!

"Under arrest?" asked Thoren.

Harkness was silent, eyes sharp under thick brows. "All right," he finally said, "We'll call it off. Maybe I did treat you a bit rough last night in the Surcingle. Forget it." He smiled, with his lips only.

Martin Strong and Steve Thoren walked out into the morning sunshine. "Harkness has his hands full," Strong said. "When you asked for me, he figured sure you were gunning for me."

Thoren said, "Let's eat."

They had breakfast at the Steerhorn Cafe. Strong explained it there. Jim Wing ran the big Cinch Ring outfit, running across the basin in the hills. Strong's spread, the Circle O, ran on the entire other side of the valley. Steve Thoren munching on a spud, had a pretty good idea what was going on.

Two big outfits, fighting for graze. The old, old story.

"How about the railroad?" Thoren asked. "Settlers—farmers—are coming in?"

"So far, we've kept the basin pretty clean," said Strong. "But there are a few. I've had enough, though, Thoren. I want to sell out."

"So that Denver outfit said," stated Thoren. "That's why I rode here."

Strong pushed back his chair. "Let's ride out, and you can look my Circle O over."

They went outside, and Strong handed him a cigar. Thoren said, "I don't want to see your outfit, Strong. I'm looking for a cow-outfit to buy, yes, but I don't want to buy into trouble. I've had enough of that. That's why I quit the Texas Rangers. I want peace, not trouble." He looked up at the blue Wyoming sky.

"Look it over, anyway," murmured Strong.

Thoren stood there, cigar unlighted. He touched a match to it and the taste was clean, good. On either sides of this high mountain valley rose pine-studded peaks, and though this was July, he could still see snow on the higher points. The valley, he figured, was about six miles wide and about twenty long—an ideal cattle-kingdom. He had looked long for a spot like this.

"I've had enough trouble, Strong."

Strong balanced himself, his face dark. "This trouble with Jim King bothering

you?" His eyes scanned the other man.

Thoren looked at his knuckles. He drew his fist into a tight, hard ball. "No, not the trouble with Jim Wing, Strong. But you can't hold it. I looked this sod over when I rode in—I even left my horse and dug into it."

"Yes?"

"Good farming soil. So far, the railroad is at the head of the valley. This Summer, by Fall anyway, it will be into this town. You can't keep the farmers out, then."

Strong's face hardened, "I think we can," he said.

Thoren shook his head.

TWO horses, a buckskin and a sorrel, stood across the street at the Lady Dollar's hitchrack. Two townswomen came down the street, carrying shopping bags, and went into the Mercantile. This was the kind of a town Thoren liked, and the sort of range he had wanted—

A blackboard came into town, turning the corner by the hardware store, and straightening out on the main street. Thoren looked at it. A girl was driving, and she was alone—a pretty thing there on the high seat. The team, though, was big—too big for a buggy. Work horses, thought Thoren.

The girl halted the team in front of the Mercantile, and stepped down. Thoren noticed her clean, smooth lines, and he liked what he saw. She brushed the front of her gingham dress and her eyes met his, holding them for a short second. Then, after tying her team, she went into the store.

"A homesteader?" asked Thoren.

"Marcie Davis." Strong told him. "She and her brother, Mack, have a homestead on my range, close to Willow Crick. They'll have to move."

"Her husband?"

"She's single. Why?"

Thoren said, slowly, "There's some attraction in this basin, at that." He was smiling a little, and Strong remembered quickly that this man had not smiled until now.

"They have a few head of cattle," said Strong. "Yesterday, I saw those cattle on Jim Wing's range. Wing won't like that."

Thoren said, "I see," and turned. They walked down the street toward the livery barn. He said, "Thanks for getting me out

of jail, Strong. I've been around jails before, but never in one."

"Harkness' error," said Strong. "Glad to help you, Thoren."

Two men came out of the Lady Dollar. One was young, thin to a lightness, and he wore fancy range garb—polished hand-stamped Justins, foxed California pants, a silk shirt. Thoren saw his thin, darkly handsome face, and he marked him as dangerous with a deadly recklessness. The other was solid, not too tall, but his big thick face was marked with power, the lines pulled deep by time.

Strong stopped suddenly, boots heavy. "That's Jim Wing," he said. "That fellow with him is his gunman, Mattie Smith."

Thoren stopped, too.

Marcie Davis was putting groceries in her buggy. Thoren saw Jim Wing walk across the dust toward her. Mattie Smith moved back, his height against the log wall of the Lady Dollar. He was quiet and his eyes found Steve Thoren's. Thoren felt them probe him, try to catalog him.

Wing said, "Marcie, you have to move those cattle of yours."

The girl saw Wing for the first time. She said, "Are you talking to me, Jim Wing?"

"You heard me, Marcie," said Wing. "You have to move your cattle. They're on my graze."

"That isn't your land, Jim Wing. That's government land, open to whoever wants to run on it."

"I claim squatter rights," said Wing quickly. "I came here twenty years ago, Marcie, and settled here. My cattle have run on that graze ever since. I'm asking you to move those cows of yours, or suffer the consequences."

"Are you threatening me, Jim Wing?"

"I ask you to move those cattle!"

"Not if I can help it," said Marcie.

Wing came closer. He laid his hand on her shoulder, and she moved back a little. She slapped him hard. Thoren heard that, sharp and brittle. Then Jim Wing shoved her against the horse.

Thoren had come up. He reached and turned Jim Wing. Thoren saw Mattie Smith coming forward, hand on his right gun, and Thoren knew he had to act fast. He drove in his right, and he drove it hard. Jim Wing went back, tripped, and sat down, flat in the dust.

Thoren had his gun on Mattie Smith, who had stopped.

Wing said, "What t'hell?"

"Be nice, Mattie," said Thoren.

Mattie Smith spread his legs wide, and looked at Thoren's gun. He drew his hands back and stood holding them awkwardly, "How did you know my name?"

"Heard it," murmured Thoren.

Wing got to his feet, moving slowly. His face was red with anger. Marcie Davis laid her cool, quick glance across Steve Thoren. "Thank you, sir," she said. She went up into the buggy then, and drove away.

Thoren glanced at Martin Strong. The cowman stood on the plank walk, waiting. Jim Wing looked hard at Strong. "This bucko work for you?" He jabbed his thumb toward Thoren.

"I don't know," said Strong. "Ask him."

Wing looked at Thoren.

Thoren said, "Maybe I do, Wing."

Wing moved off, gesturing to Mattie Smith. They got their broncs and rode out, loping with dust behind them.

THEY sat their horses on a ridge over Wishbone River. Here the river came from the mountains, mad with cold snow-water, and it moved into the valley to become slow and sluggish.

Martin Strong's right arm covered the basin in a grand sweep. "here it is, Thoren. And on that side of the Wishbone, that range in there—that's my Circle O range."

Thoren's forefinger jabbed downward. "And that house down there?"

Strong was scowling. "That's Marcie Davis' farm," he said. "Willow Creek comes in, there."

The sunlight was brilliant, dappling the green earth. Thoren lifted his gaze and marked the farms of other homesteaders, spread out on the green basin below. He brought his eyes back to Marcie Davis' farm, then brought them up Willow Creek to a plateau, a ridge that overlooked Wishbone Range.

He said, "Let's ride down."

They came down the lope, braced against the quick rush of their horses. Strong was quiet, a scowl fixed on his face. He said, "I've been losing stock, Thoren. So, for that matter, has Jim Wing. Or so the liar says."

Thoren shrugged.

They came to the plateau. Here was about one hundred and sixty acres, Thoren judged. A homestead, with Willow Creek hurrying through, and cold springs along the base of the hills. Thoren leaned back, pondering.

Strong said, "We'll hit my outfit by chuck time."

Thoren turned his horse. They rode on a distance and Thoren said, "This is open range here, I take it? Open for homesteading?"

Strong glanced at him, then nodded.

They rode into the Davis farm. Marcie came out, spilling frothy dishwater across the hard soil. She said, "Hello," and Thoren saw her surprise.

She turned to call inside the house. "Mack, we have company."

Mack Davis was a solid man, younger than Thoren. He was dark, quiet, solid in his hand-stamped Justins. He looked at Martin Strong, his gray eyes hard with anger.

"You're off your range, cowman!" he said.

Strong ignored his anger. "Meet Steve Thoren," he said.

Davis did not shake hands. He studied Thoren, said, "A cowman, huh? Another gun-rider for the big Circle O spread?" He looked at Strong. "Money'll hire them, huh, Strong?"

Marcie spoke. "Don't talk that way, Mack. Mr. Thoren is the man who knocked Jim Wing down."

Davis said, "Thanks, Thoren."

Thoren didn't like the way he said it, but he shrugged his shoulders. This man was a riddle to him. He should have been thankful to him for tumbling Jim Wing in the dust, but he apparently wasn't. Thoren blamed it on the inequalities of human nature, and let it go at that.

Strong lifted his Stetson. "You'll excuse us, Miss Marcie."

Thoren turned his horse. They rode out, dust stirring lazily. Thoren turned in his saddle and looked back. Mack Davis stood there, watching them leave. They crossed the basin, loping between fenced lanes. Thoren saw ten farms; and there was a schoolhouse, and a church. The farmers had their roots deep, he saw.

They left the fences, moving out into open range covered with buffalo grass and

native bluejoint. They came to the hills, loped into them; before them lay the big Circle O on a mountain meadow, a fast stream running through it. Thoren saw a trout leap against the far bank.

They came to the ranch and left their horses at the barn.

Strong said, "Look over the spread, Thoren," and went into the log ranch-house. Thoren moved from building to building. Presumably he was looking at the structures; actually, he studied the men.

He counted an even dozen. Three loafed beside the barn, hunkered there and watching him. Seven played cards in the long bunkhouse. Two were pounding horseshoes in the blacksmith shop. Gunmen, he thought, sure as hell. The trail had marked them. But he knew none of them. Long ways to Texas.

THE cook banged the triangle. The gunmen went to the chuck-shack. Strong came out on the porch, and called Thoren in.

Mrs. Strong served the meal in the ranch-house living room. She was a quiet, thin woman with gray hair. She told Thoren about her two children, both married and living in the East.

"We want to move back there to be close to our children, Mr. Thoren."

Thoren ate slowly, enjoying the meal. He said, "I can see that point, Mrs. Strong." He looked at Martin Strong. "However, I still stand on my early statement, sir. I don't care to buy into trouble."

"A few bullets will knock Jim Wing down for good," growled Strong. "A few more, properly placed, will scare these farmers out of Wishbone." He speared a steak with his fork.

Thoren saw Mr. Strong's face was pale. "Jim Wing has offered to buy the ranch," said Mrs. Strong.

Strong swallowed his mouthful. "I'll see myself in hell first, Mother."

Finishing the meal in silence, Steve Thoren thanked the matronly woman, and got on his horse. Again Martin Strong said, "Damned sorry, Thoren," and Thoren lifted one hand lazily as he rode out. The afternoon sun was hot and it took his bronc down to a running walk.

He gained a high ridge, his horse blowing and sweaty. From here, the valley lay

below him again, and he saw the plateau on Willow Creek. He built a scene in his mind: the ranch-house there, the barn and corral there.

Accordingly he rode down the incline. He put his horse across Wishbone River, the animal swimming a few paces. Riding a while he came out on a grassy clearing.

Mattie Smith sat his horse there.

The dandy was astraddle a heavily-blackened pinto. He looked like a school kid, but Thoren knew gunmen, and Mattie Smith was one. Smith's eyes were bright against his dark face.

"This is Wing grass, Thoren," he murmured.

Thoren said, "Just riding across."

Mattie Smith spoke crisply. "Thoren, my orders are to keep Circle O men off Cinch Ring graze. I'm drawing Jim Wing's wages and I'm backing up Jim Wing's orders."

Thoren smiled. "I'm no Circle O man."

Smith lost his tension. "Then you turned Martin Strong down? And you're riding out of Wishbone Basin?"

"Not riding out," corrected Thoren. He swung an arm toward the higher reaches. "There's a quarter-section of land up there, high on Willow Creek. It butts Marcie Davis' land on the west. The squatter rights are open on that, I guess. Wheat and corn is coming in, Smith."

"You turning farmer?" asked Mattie Smith.

Thoren nodded.

Smith looked toward the western *mesa*. "You're really walking into trouble now, Thoren. Whoever controls the upper Willow Creek, controls the water in Wishbone Basin. Wishbone itself is too fast to dam, but Willow Creek—"

"I was thinking of that," said Thoren. "If water got turned on this loam, it would grow anything."

"Strong and Jim Wing both know that," growled Mattie Smith. "They've kept settlers off that Willow Creek reach, Thoren. Move in on it and you move against both of them, and they're heavy to push."

"I'll take that chance."

"Guns'll be against you."

"Your gun, too, I suppose." Thoren made himself loose, without anger. Smith misread his easiness and his muscles were not ready. Thoren turned his horse, stir-

ring the animal almost lazily. Then his .45 was out and up, arching down. The blow clipped Mattie Smith, who had opened his mouth. Smith went to the ground that way, his mouth open in silent surprise.

His horse trotted to one side, then stepped on a rein and stopped. Thoren rubbed his gun on his chaps, smiling faintly. He holstered the piece, then. He said, "Sleep tight, mama's boy," and rode across the clearing.

He was jumpy for a moment, the muscle along his right thigh jerking under pressure. This left, and the dryness around his tongue fell back. When Mattie Smith next met him, Smith would be like a suspicious wolf—he would circle him figuratively, walking on stiff legs, fangs bared in a snarl.

Another enemy, Thoren thought. And he had quit the Texas Rangers because a man made so many enemies when he rode with a star. He loped his horse straight to the west and town. Now a rider swung out of the brush, and Thoren pulled in.

Mack Davis said, "Hello, Thoren."

Thoren had the sudden impression that Davis had mistaken him for another rider. He said, "Hello," and added, "You're on Jim Wing's grass, I'd say."

"Do you work for Wing, now?" asked Davis, surlily.

Thoren sat a quiet saddle, letting that pass. Davis was implying he was a gunman, a rider who sold his Colts to the highest bidder. Thoren said, "I work for no man."

"Then you're showing sense," growled Mack Davis. "You're leaving this range, I take it?"

Thoren told him about the plateau quarter-section. Davis' youthful face was flushed, and Thoren wondered why. Davis said, "Then we'll neighbors, I guess," and added, before Thoren could answer, "And Marcie an' me don't care for neighbors."

"The hell with what you care!" Thoren said.

The words were flat, without compromise.

Davis said, "Don't get your dander up."

The moment was past, and Thoren let a lazy wariness creep into him. "Don't ride back there to the east. Mattie Smith is back there, Davis. We had a few words, and my gun came down."

Davis studied him, surprised. "Smith is

a fast man," he murmured suspiciously. "Not too fast," corrected Thoren.

There was nothing more here, and Thoren caught himself remembering Marcie Davis—the clean, long sweep of her body, the quietness of her sweet face. She was a song and a flash of sunshine, and she could make worthwhile the days of the man she loved.

Davis turned his horse. "So long," he said.

Thoren stopped for a long, careful look across the basin. Mack Davis was moving east, and he was close to Mattie Smith. Thoren pondered on this, and then gave it up. What Mack Davis did was his business, just as long as his Justins walked on somebody else's bunions, and not the bunions of Steve Thoren. If I had any bunions, thought Thoren, smiling.

The sun had heeled low when he reached town. He left the horse in the livery, took a room at the hotel, asked the clerk who the land agent was.

"Sheriff Harkness handles that, sir."

Thoren thanked him and walked out.

Harkness sat in his office, his jaw swollen. He said, "Well, are you ready to leave town, Thoren?"

Thoren smiled openly at the invitation and the relief in Harkness' voice. "I'll leave tomorrow," he said.

"Good," said Harkness.

"But I'll be back once a week or so," said Thoren mischievously. "You see, I'm taking up a homestead. I want you to make out the filing papers, Harkness."

Harkness scowled. "Where?"

"On upper Willow Creek."

Harkness wanted more answers and Thoren found the spot on the land-map hooked against the wall. Harkness said, "I suppose you know what trouble you'll get?"

"My headache, Harkness."

Harkness sighed, rubbing his jaw gingerly. "They'll bury you here on Wishbone range, Steve Thoren."

Thoren was irritable. "Good as any soil for a grave," he growled.

CHAPTER TWO

The Ghost-Cattle Move by Night

THOREN bought a wagon, harnesses, and a team. That night he wrote a letter to Molly, telling her he wanted to have

the place built and the fences up before she came from Texas. He hired a carpenter, a drunken, bowlegged man who knew his work and who loved a bottle.

They moved the outfit out to the plateau the next forenoon, with Thoren's saddle-horse tied to the wagon's end-gate, and with barbed wire spools, a keg or two of nails, and some two-by-fours on the bed. The carpenter said he would stay on the quarter-section until the job was done. He was broke and needed a stake before winter came to the valley.

"Winter comes early here," he said, taking another drink.

They cut pine down on the ridge and trimmed off the branches. They rolled these into place after hewing down opposite sides with a broad axe. The cabin went up slowly, and while the carpenter worked on that, Thoren punched holes with a fence-bar and stuck diamond-willow posts into them, tamping the posts tight. It was hard work, but well worth it, he thought.

The days were hot and he lost the saddle-stiffness acquired on his long ride north. He sent down thick cottonwood trees as corner posts and braced them with straight pine. He aimed to put all the posts in first and then string the wire on them, getting the carpenter to help him with the wire stretcher.

Marcie Davis rode up, pretty in the saddle. She looked over the fence and Thoren thought he detected something that shouldn't have shown in her tanned, oval face. She came down and sat on a boulder, holding her horse's reins. Thoren greeted her pleasantly.

According to what she had heard, she said, Jim Wing had openly accused Martin Strong of cattle-stealing. Thoren remembered Mrs. Strong, and he knew she was worried now. It looked as though violence would be inevitable.

"When was this?"

"Yesterday, down in town." She added, "Wing claims he was holding a small herd—about two hundred head—down on a hay-meadow, letting them graze it after the hay had been cut and put up. The fences were cut and the cattle were gone. Wing trailed them to Wishbone and they went into the water, there. He thinks they crossed over on Circle O grass."

"Has he ridden Strong's property?"

"I don't know, Steve."

Thoren settled beside her, rolling cigaret. He licked the wheatstraw. "Funny thing," he said, "but I've noticed lots of cattle tracks through this end of my range. And yet, there are no stray cattle."

"When was this?"

"One night the carpenter and I were in town."

She was quiet, her teeth against her bottom lip. "I think you just didn't notice them before, Steve. Cattle would have to move around our place to get here, and we would have heard them. Or seen them, if daylight. Circle O and Cinch Ring cattle used to run here, when grass was higher. Now that grass is getting short, they're moving down on the valley floor."

Thoren nodded.

She said, "Well, I'll see you again," and got her in saddle. She sat there for a while, looking down the line of fence posts. Then she turned to Thoren and asked if he were going to the dance Saturday night at the school house.

Thoren admitted he hadn't thought of going, then added, "But I'll go, if you'll go with me."

"Mattie Smith asked me first," she murmured.

Thoren said, "I might dance with you there."

He watched her ride off, his eyes reflective. He wondered why she had ridden to the plateau farm. Was it to see him? He found himself wondering what Molly would say, and he smiled quickly.

He strung wire on the south half-mile that next day. He had missed a day in his reckoning, and the carpenter informed him in a roundabout way that this was Saturday, and therefore payday. Thoren wanted to keep the man with him, so he suggested that they attend the dance together. The carpenter agreed, and they drove to the school-house in the lumber wagon. This way, if the carpenter did get real drunk, Thoren thought, he could load him in the wagon and take him home. And Thoren knew the man was due for a drunk.

BUGGIES and wagons and saddle-horses were tied to cottonwoods and to the short hitchrack as they drove up by the lights of the small school-house. The carpenter hit the ground with, "I'll see you later, Thoren," and went toward a group

of men drinking in the shadow of a diamond-willow clump.

Thoren tied the team to a sapling and brushed the dust from his blue serge suit. As he went to the hall, he glanced at the horses tied to the hitching-posts. Some Circle O brands and some of Jim Wing's Cinch Ring broncs. Although their bosses didn't cotton to the nesters, evidently the cowboys—some of them, anyway—were here at the nester dance. Thoren wondered if they had come to raise trouble.

He bought a dance ticket and some farmers came up, shaking hands and introducing themselves. He had a drink from the bottle and he felt a measure of conviviality come into him. There were pretty girls here—good girls—and they made him think of Molly, waiting in Texas. One man introduced him to his wife and two daughters, and Thoren took the dark-haired one out on the floor.

He measured the big room with one quick glance, seeking trouble in this crowd. Long years as a ranger had turned him to the first vibrations of trouble, but there was no outward sign of conflict here. Both Circle O and Cinch Ring men were dancing with the farmers' wives and daughters, no outward antipathy showing on them. Thoren let his tension relax and danced with the woman in his arms.

She was talking to him quietly, and he listened gravely. Mattie Smith went by with Marcie Davis, and the Cinch Ring gunman gave him a slow, blank stare. Marcie said, "Hello, Steve," and smiled quickly. After that, Thoren's partner said little.

The music stopped. Thoren took her back to her bench and bowed. "Really, miss, it wasn't so deadly, was it?"

She played ignorant. "What, sir?"

"That smile Marcie gave me."

The girl said, almost sharply, "She's after you, Mr. Thoren. The basin is talking about it." She was quickly repentant. "Oh, you'll forgive me for that, please!" "For that," said Thoren, "I'll take you to supper."

The girl laughed then, quick and bright. Thoren crossed the room and asked, "This dance, Miss Marcie?" Mattie Smith, sitting beside the girl, scowled.

Marcie put her heel back, looked up. "Mattie doesn't like you," she said.

Thoren said, "Do you?"

"Oh," she said, "Right to the point. So quickly?"

"You're old beyond your years," Thoren laughed.

She was humming with the band, her lips close to his ear. The music ended and he returned her to Mattie Smith, who was still scowling. Thoren said, suddenly, "Buck up, Smith. I'm not stealing her!"

Smith had his hand on his gun.

A man hurried over, and Thoren saw his star. Thoren moved back and said, "Nothing will happen, Marshal." Marcie said, "Come on outside, Mattie, and cool off."

The little by-play went unnoticed by almost all the rest of the crowd. Thoren danced with a farmer's wife, and he smiled faintly. He ate supper with the farmer's daughter, and she chatted gaily now. But he was quiet, too quiet.

"Marcie went home," said the girl almost spitefully. "Mattie Smith was getting too drunk, she said."

"Thanks," murmured Thoren.

Evidently Mack Davis had not attended the dance. Thoren excused himself and went out to look after his carpenter. He had not seen the man since they had arrived. The carpenter was sitting on a flat boulder, talking with two cronies. He handed Thoren the flask. The whiskey was terrible.

"Home stilled," said the carpenter.

"You'll hit at one nail tomorrow," said Thoren, "And you'll drive in another six inches away."

The night was clear with a few stars. The dance, he knew, would continue until dawn, as was the custom in the cow country. And he knew he couldn't have gotten the carpenter away, even if he had tried. He decided to stay until the dance broke up.

When the makeshift orchestra played, "Home, Sweet home," Thoren found his carpenter asleep under a buggy, his head a scant foot from the hind-hoofs of the patient old horse between the shafts. The buggy's owners, a farmer and his wife, were just starting to back the horse away from the hitching-post when Thoren spied his carpenter. He called for the man to stop, and the farmer looked at him in wonder as he came running.

"What is it, fellow?"

Thoren pulled the carpenter out, laugh-

ing a little. "You almost backed over my carpenter. Don't kill him now, 'cause I need him. After he gets done with my house, then you can run over him."

The woman gasped, "Why, we didn't see him when we climbed in the buggy. Why, Pa might've backed over him—"

The carpenter was limp, the rotten whiskey taking control of his muscles. Thoren picked him up, and carried him to the wagon. He had a quilt in the back and he put the man on this, where he snored with drunken fervor.

Rigs were leaving, cowboys were riding out. A heavy-set woman was trying patiently to get her drunken husband, a small man, into their buggy. The marshal came up and said, "Watch that Mattie Smith, Thoren."

Thoren said, "Thanks, Marshal."

He backed the wagon out, cramped the wheels, and drove out at a trot. Dawn was just breaking over the horizon.

THOREN let the team jog along. The carpenter would need watching when they got home, or he might take a horse and head across country for town, hoping to prolong his drunk. That meant that Thoren would have to stay close to the half-built cabin, in order to watch the man.

They passed the Davis farm. Chickens clucked in the yard and the dog barked, but no persons moved around the place. Thoren found himself thinking of Marcie Davis, and because he thought of her, he thought of Mattie Smith. He wondered, idly, where they had gone after leaving the dance.

You're worse than an old maid, he thought.

He knew that now he would either have to kill Mattie Smith or drive him out of Wishbone Basin. Smith had it in for him, and Smith would use his gun. Thoren was quiet inside, sensing the danger in this thin, flashy-dressed rider. He had seen too many men of Mattie Smith's temperament to misjudge or underestimate the Cinch Ring cowboy.

He sobered up the carpenter, feeding him whiskey gradually. The man went into a deep sleep and woke up grinning the next morning. Thoren tapered him off with a short slug and the carpenter went to work.

For the next two days Thoren worked

on his fence. He strung the wires along the south side, pulling it from the roll with his saddle-horse, leaving it shiny and bright behind him. He strung the three wires along that side, pulling them tight with the wire-stretcher. When he rode to the fence-posts on the west, he saw the tracks of cattle.

He studied them, kneeling. About two days old, he figured, from the manure. The cattle had gone west into the mountains. He back-tracked across his homestead, and saw that the tracks had skirted the Davis' farm.

Those cattle had been moved through while he and his carpenter had been at the dance. For the second time in a matter of days he had found cattle tracks crossing his land, heading into the high western mountains.

He rode to the cabin. He hunkered, drew his finger idly through the dust. "Hear any cattle the last few days, carpenter? Tracks show them going across my place."

"I haven't heard or seen any, Thoren."

Thoren said, "Keep it to yourself, will you?" The man nodded and Thoren remembered that Marcie Davis had said Jim Wing had lost two hundred head a week ago. "What's across the ridge, carpenter?"

"Gold minin' town, Thoren. Got a mild rush, you might say—discovered good ore in ol' digging's, I reckon." He added, "Been goin' on for a year. Hey, give me a boost with this door jamb!"

Thoren did no more fencing that day. He followed the trail of the cattle as it led him into the mountains. It crossed the divide, fifteen miles away, then went down and became lost in the wilderness of flint and lava beds. He rode back, scowling.

A mile west of his homestead, Marcie Davis rode out of the brush on a big bay. She had a dead coyote tied across the back of her saddle, and Thoren saw the rifle in her saddle-boot. He looked at the mountain behind her. From up there she could have seen him follow those tracks.

"Coyotes have been stealing my chickens," she said. "I got one of them. I'm going to get his pelt tanned and make a rug out of it."

The coyote had been shot through the head. "You're a good shot, Miss Davis." "You're off your range." She smiled.

They rode down the trail together. The wind was strong, pushing the dust along the trail and covering the cattle tracks. "Lots of wind here," he said.

"Comes down this canyon. The fact is, it blows so hard I believe that if you break this soil, it will blow away. I don't think much of your homestead site, Steve."

The wind won't get that strong, Thoren thought. She was a riddle, she was soft and womanly, and then she was hard and quick, a dead coyote tied cross her saddle. They came to Willow Creek.

"I'll dam it there," said Thoren.

She sat saddle, silent, and looked at the creek. Thoren showed her where the ditch would run, circling along the hill. Turn-outs would be placed there and the water freed for Wishbone Basin. She nodded approval, red lips open a little. Suddenly she asked, "When is Molly coming, Steve?"

"When my house is completed, Marcie. How did you know about her?"

"Mrs. Strong. You told her."

Thoren remembered. "That's right."

"Damn it," she said. "You find an eligible man, and he's doomed to marry some-



body else." She smiled a little bitterly.

Their horses were close. Thoren put his arm around her and held her and kissed her, her lips open a little. He said, mischievously, "Is it that bad, Marcie?" and drew back.

"Steve!" She turned her horse. "We'd better get home."

They rode in silence to his farmhouse. He felt frustrated, angry with himself. Then he remembered the firm push of her body, her moist lips. "You're not angry, Marcie?"

"How could I be?"

HE WATCHED her ride away, loping east. The carpenter came up, wiped sweat from his forehead. "Purty girl, that Marcie. Makes a man wish he was fifteen years younger—"

Thoren shook his head. "I can't understand her."

"I've been married three times. I never understood a one of them. Say, Thoren, give me a hand with this window frame? I want to true it up."

Thoren held the window frame in place. A mile away, he saw Mattie Smith come out of Willow Creek, ride over to Marcie. They rode into the Davis' farm together.

Thoren told himself, *Remember Molly, fellow, remember Molly.* She had dark, glistening hair, black as a magpie's wing, and her eyes were clear and bright, sparkling. He rode into town that next morning and sent for her.

Then he rode to Martin Strong's ranch. "Change your mind?" asked the Circle O owner.

Thoren shook his head. "I got land enough and trouble enough."

Strong said suddenly, "I lost some cattle again last weekend. About a hundred and fifty head, I reckon. They were on Clear Crick. They'd been raised there and they stayed close to the crick, and now they're gone. No tracks that we could find. Took them across the range, heading toward the mountains."

"Jim Wing lost some, too," said Thoren.

Strong said, "Either Wing got these, or the farmers. They'll need beef. They have to have something to chew on. And most of them are stony broke."

Thoren shrugged his shoulders.

He told Mrs. Strong he had sent for

Molly. Then he rode across the basin to Jim Wing's ranch. Wing was putting down a corral post. He wiped sweat from under his Stetson and regarded Thoren blankly.

"You lose any more cattle, Wing?"

Wing studied him. "No."

Thoren informed him that Martin Strong had lost his Clear Creek bunch.

"An' I suppose he accuses me, damn him! Prob'ly never lost no cows at all, the cow thief! Jus' says so to make it look like I've stole some of his! But if he did lose them, the farmers got 'em!"

Thoren nodded absently. "I hear you want to buy Strong's spread. Ever offer to buy it from him?"

"Had an agent approach him."

Thoren shrugged. "Mattie Smith doesn't like me, Wing. I gunned him down and knocked him off his horse. I hear he's making talk against me."

"Maybe so."

"Marcie Davis has smiled at me, too. Smith don't like that. Just thought I'd tell you, Wing."

Wing said, "He can take care of himself; he's over twenty-one. How do we know you ain't in on this cow stealin', Thoren?"

Thoren got off his horse. "Say that again, Wing!" His hand was on his gun.

Wing stepped back. "Don't pull, Thoren! Hell, don't take it too seriously, man! I said the wrong thing."

Thoren got into his saddle. "So long, Wing."

Thoren smiled a little, remembering Wing's sudden fear. Wing was not tough—unless he was pressed too hard. He had gunmen, though. So did Martin Strong. Wishbone Basin was a powderkeg and only a lighted match was needed to rip it apart in flame and killings.

Thoren had the swift impression that this was building up, ready to break open. Cattle were moving out. Strong said he was not rustling; so did Jim Wing. Signs pointed to the farmers, then.

The wind was strong, bending wheat and sucking moisture from this soil. Some of the unseeded land was blowing a little, for there were no roots to hold it down. Maybe Marcie had something when she said his homestead might blow. But he remembered Willow Creek and its sparkling water. Keep the soil damp and get roots into it,

and it would not blow. Irrigation water was the byword.

Dusk was coming in. He was tired; he'd ridden a long ways. A farmer, digging in his yard, called to him and Thoren drew in, waited. The farmer was a broad man, thick across the shoulders, with the patient mark of the soil on his wide, homely face.

"You're Steve Thoren, I take it?"

Thoren nodded.

"They tell me you aim to dam up Willow," the farmer said, "and turn water down on the Basin. We need irrigation here, Thoren."

Thoren glanced at a dust devil-twist running across an alkali flat. He admitted that the farmer was right. The man introduced himself as Henry Campbell. He and other farmers—Wishbone Basin sodbusters—had discussed the dam. They wanted to incorporate and build a valley project, pooling their money and their labor to build the dam. They had asked him to contact Thoren.

Thoren admitted that the job was too big for one man. And besides, the water was community water—he held the water-rights, of course—but the farmer was right, the dam should be a community affair, for every farmer would profit by it. How about a meeting tomorrow night at the school-house?

Campbell nodded. "I'll get word around, Thoren. Set it for seven o'clock."

Thoren rode off with a small grin on his face. Here he was—an ex-Texas Ranger—ready to start an irrigation project for a bunch of hoemen, and he was a farmer himself. What would Molly say? Hell, she'd like living on a farm just as well as a cow ranch . . . as long as she was with him.

Thoren pulled in his horse.

Mack Davis rode out of the willows, his gun up. Thoren said, "Put that gun down, Davis!" and Davis holstered the piece clumsily. Thoren said, "Don't ever pull against a man unless you mean it!"

"The dusk," murmured Davis. "I didn't recognize you."

Thoren turned in his saddle and noticed a rider loping into the gathering night, about a half-mile to the east. "Rides like Mattie Smith," he said.

"Marcie," said Davis.

"She's a pretty woman," said Thoren.

His gaze was direct. "Wing won't like that, Mack Davis. Mattie Smith, his top gundog, running with a nester girl." He was quiet for a long second, boyish face thoughtful. "This is getting tight, fellow, and guns might talk."

"Let them," growled Mack Davis.

Thoren studied the way Davis sat his saddle. He had the swift impression that years in leather had molded Mack Davis to a horse, and that his hands were not shaped to the lines of a plow-team.

"Hard words, Davis."

Davis leaned forward, voice clear. "All right, Thoren, look at it this way. Three factions—Wing, Strong, us farmers—and they're ready to move. Wing loses cattle, he says; Strong loses cattle, he says. Us farmers ain't stealin' them. An outside gang, takin' advantage of this trouble?"

"Might be, Davis."

Mack Davis swore. "Hell, Wing and Strong are buckin' each other, the damn' dirty thieves. An' blamin' it on us hoemen!"

He gathered up his reins, "Well, I'll see you at the water meetin'."

CHAPTER THREE

Hot Beef for a Boomtown

THEY had the cabin's walls up and the windows in. Rafters were in place and soon the sheeting would go over them, then the shingles would be nailed down.

That night a bullet came out of the dark brush, broke a window into a thousand pieces, and knocked the carpenter down.

The man had been carrying the coffee pot from the stove. He staggered, dropped the pot, and coffee and grounds spilled across the rough floor. The roar of the gun was loud.

Thoren slapped the candle out, settled on the floor. "Where did he get you?" he asked hoarsely.

"My shoulder! Get out there, Thoren! Get him—"

Thoren ran out the back door. The bullet had come from the other side of the cabin. He circled, gun out, running. This way he would come in behind the ambusher.

A thousand thoughts fought in him. Out of a peaceful evening, an ambush gun had spoken. And why? Somebody wanted him

off this land. Who had it in for him?

The bullet had been meant for him, he knew. But the carpenter had looked like him, as he had walked past the window with the candle light behind him. Thoren crashed through rosebushes, the stickers pulling at his shirt. Through the thick dusk he heard a man running somewhere ahead.

He went down, his cutter up. He shot four times, shooting at the sound. Hard above the roar of his gun he heard the cllop of hoofs leaving the mountains. He ran ahead, panting. But when he came to the edge of the hill, the rider was gone. He could not hear him, or see him. He halted, breathing heavily, and reloaded his Colts. But he could see nothing. He went back to the house.

The carpenter sat on a chair, cursing, a bottle beside him. He had stuffed a towel into his bloodied shirt. Thoren draped the windows with pieces of canvas, cutting up his tarp. This done he lighted the candle.

"Who was it, Thoren?"

"Damn' if I know, carpenter. You got any enemies that would aim to notch you off, fellow?"

The carpenter smiled. "Not unless one of my ex-wives found out where I was."

Thoren studied the man's wound. The bullet, he saw, had broken the collar-bone; the man would be laid up for some time. The carpenter reminded him that the bullet had not been meant for him, and that he had accidentally stopped it.

"Reckon we're built about the same, Thoren, an' somebody's made a mistake," he said.

Thoren was sober, struck by the grimness of the scene. Harnessing up, he put the carpenter into the wagon, and drove to town, leaving the man with the doctor.

Next day he worked alone. Temporarily he gave up his fencing and spent his time working on the cabin. He had to get a roof on it before a chance thunderstorm came and warped the flooring. When evening came he had the sheeting down. He would start shingling the next morning.

Marcie Davis rode over next afternoon. She boosted the one-by-twelve boards up to him as he worked on the roof. She had heard about the carpenter's accident. Thoren had the impression that she was worried. She left at five, after saying she would meet him at her place, and they would ride

to the meeting at the schoolhouse together.

Thoren ate and rode into the yard of the Davis' farm at dusk. Marcie had her black horse saddled and ready.

Thoren asked, "Where's Mack?"

"Sick in bed."

Thoren said, "That's too bad," and walked into the house. Mack Davis looked up from the bed. "Mattie Smith won't like you around here, Thoren."

"That's too bad," said Thoren.

Davis coughed, blaming all his miseries on a summer cold. Thoren said, "Hope you get well, Mack, and get well soon." But the man was stiff and unfriendly, and Thoren wondered why.

Rigs and wagons and saddle horses lined the hitching-post at the schoolhouse. Campbell took charge of the meeting. Thoren met all the farmers and their families, and a bottle went the rounds.

They found seats on benches and desks. Thoren, glancing around, read them for what they were: hard-bitten sons of the sod, working hard to get a new start in a new land. Some were from the East, refugees from steel mills and cotton mills, second generations of Slavs, Norwegians and other European races who were returning to the soil their ancestors had forsaken. Only this soil was in America, and was better and more productive than that held jealously by European nobility.

A committee was chosen, with Thoren at its head. It would file papers of incorporation and work out the site of the dam. Two of the farmers were surveyors and they still had their levels and transits. They would do the preliminary work, laying out the ditches and main arteries of this new irrigation system.

Gradually the plan took shape. They went out with high hopes, for in water lay their salvation, their hope of keeping this newly found freedom of theirs. Buggies and rigs squeaked protestingly into the night. But the men and women who rode in them had high hopes.

MARCIE rode home with Thoren. "This valley will bloom," she said. Then she added, "But what about Jim Wing and Martin Strong? Water will be the death-knell to their hopes, Steve."

"They'll fight," said Thoren. "They'll have to fight, or step back." He thought

of the ambush bullet that had broken through the window and knocked the carpenter down. Had that bullet been fired by either Strong or Wing, or one of their hired gunhands? He debated on that.

Neither of the cowmen seemed low enough to resort to ambush methods. In the few weeks he had been on Willow Creek, Thoren had not been threatened by either Wing or Strong. He had, in fact, a touch of friendship for either. Although his fist had upset Wing that day in town, he doubted if Wing really hated him. Or did the man just hide his emotions?

Marcie said, "Good night, Steve," and turned into the yard of the Davis' farm. Thoren touched his pony with his spurs and loped up the trail. The night was dark, too dark for ambush work, he figured. Yet he was tight across his spine and his nerves were keened to each sound in the night.

Again he slept in the brush. And dawn found him cooking breakfast over a small fire in the house. He worked on the roof that morning, and the afternoon found him riding along his fence, still unfinished. Cattle tracks again marked the trail that led into the mountains. Cattle had gone over his land while he had attended the farmer meeting at the school-house.

He sat his horse, looking over the terrain. He had evidently settled where cattle would be moved if they were to be trailed across the mountains. There was another pass, he had heard, miles to the north. He followed the trail until the harsh wind whipped the sand away. He crossed the ridge and rode into the mining town the carpenter had told him about.

Dogtown, this town. Thoren read the name carved on a pine-slab sign hung from

a post. There was a slaughter house on the close edge of the mountain community with its pine-pole shacks and the white expanse of canvas tents. Evidently slaughtering only occurred when cattle were brought in; now the pens were empty. Thoren left his horse and walked to a cowhide, slung across a corral, hairy side out. The brand was a Box N S, a brand foreign to him. No other hides were in sight any place.

A heavy man came out of a building, walked up to him. "You got any business here, stranger?"

"Just riding through," said Thoren. "A cowpoke down on his luck. Thought maybe you'd have a job for me. Worked in a slaughter house back East, skinning."

"No work," the man said.

Thoren looked at the cowhide. "Strange brand to me," he murmured.

"The Box N S runs cattle south of here, fella. Big outfit, supplies most of our beef. We butcher regularly, too, 'cause this camp has about five—six thousand people, countin' the Injuns that hang around. Better get a pan or sluice box an' get a little dust. No work here."

"No much of a hand with a pan," said Thoren. He got up and rode toward Dogtown's main street. He knew, sure as hell, that the cattle—the stock driven across his land—were headed for that slaughter house. He wondered what was done with the hides taken from stolen stock. Probably given an acid bath and burned up with quicklime in some pit to destroy them.

The railroad ran through here and Thoren heard the whistle of a locomotive. The steel was a few miles east of here, he had heard, and it would reach Wishbone Basin in a short time, poking its two steel fingers

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across the basin's bottom. He saw the engine, now, its steam white around the black metal. His bronc reared and pawed, scared of the contraption. An extra train was in siding and the train crews lived in boxcars. Quite a few men worked for the railroad, he was thinking, that would be an outlet for stolen beef, too.

He needed some eight-penny nails and he had been unable to buy any in Wishbone Basin. He got some here at a hardware store. He bought some groceries, too, tying them behind his saddle in a sack.

Suddenly he stopped, studying a man up the street. The distance was two blocks, and he wasn't sure whether the man was Jim Wing or not. The man went into a saloon. Thoren finished tying the sack to his saddle and walked to the saloon, mingling with the crowd on the plank sidewalks. He disliked these boomtowns. Too many people and too much excitement.

He turned into the saloon.

Although the evening trade was some hours away, miners and loiterers were gathering in the saloon. Thoren took a chair at a table and a girl came up.

"Just beer," he said.

The girl came back with two beers. Thoren gave her two silver dollars and said, "Drink yours some other place."

Thoren watched her go to another table, sitting opposite a miner. He sipped his cold beer and ran his gaze along the men at the bar.

Then he saw Wing. The man was at a table at the far end of the saloon, drinking alone. Thoren glanced at him, then glanced away.

Wing saw him, then.

But Wing made no sign, no move, of recognition. Thoren got to his feet and went outside, leaving his beer unfinished. Now what was Wing doing in Dogtown?

Thoren did not ride to his homestead. He followed the survey-stakes of the railroad into Wishbone, where he spent the night at the hotel. The carpenter had his shoulder in a cast and sat in the lobby, playing cards with one hand. "If I get drunk and fall down, I'll be in a hell of a mess, Thoren."

NEXT morning Thoren hired another carpenter, a lanky Swede named Ole Johnson. He and Johnson were leaving

town in Johnson's buggy when the rig of Martin Strong drove close, with Strong and his wife. The woman, Thoren noticed, was smiling.

"We're leaving," she told Thoren. "We're driving to Dogtown where we'll catch the train."

Thoren looked inquiringly at Martin Strong.

"Sold the ranch, Thoren. The missus talked me into it. Jim Wing bought it all—plumb to the stock-plate, trigger and all." He was silent for a moment. "Reckon it's a man's privilege to change his mind, huh?"

Thoren smiled at Mrs. Strong. "Or a woman's," he added. He wished them good luck and watched the rig roll to the east for Dogtown. Well, Wing was the only cowman in Wishbone now. The cattle-stealing days were over, Thoren hoped. Now the main set-to would be between Wing and the hoemen.

Mack Davis was at the barn when Thoren and the carpenter drove by. His cold, he said, was better. Thoren wondered where Marcie was but that was soon settled, for the girl came out of the kitchen, flour to her brown elbows. She was baking a cake. Thoren liked the daub of flour on her right cheek.

The carpenter went right to work, pulling his tool-box out of the buggy. Thoren unsaddled his horse and put it on a picket-rope in the brush where the grass was longer. He kept thinking of that slaughter house in Dogtown, and Jim Wing. Two hundred head of cattle going over the pass to the mining town would bring down a nice sum of money. Five cents a pound for a twelve-hundred pound steer meant sixty dollars a critter. Multiply that by two hundred and you had twelve thousand dollars. Maybe Wing had bought the Strong ranch on money obtained from selling stolen Strong cattle.

The week was a busy one. Thoren got little done on his fence. The lawyer came out from Wishbone, looked over the dam site, and then he and Thoren and the committee got to work, drawing up corporation papers. Jim Wing rode over one afternoon.

"Where's this dam goin' be, Thoren?"

Mattie Smith rode with his boss, cold and quiet. Thoren looked at the thin gunman and nodded, and Smith's return nod

was barely perceptible. He showed the Cinch Ring owner and his gunhand the place where the dam was going in. Surveyors were working below them, laying out the course of the ditches.

"This valley will bloom like a spring rose," murmured Jim Wing.

"We think so," said Thoren. He wondered what Wing wanted with him. He watched the two ride off, wondering about them.

Next day he and Marcie Davis rode into Wishbone town together. Marcie was quiet, serious. Thoren had difficulty analyzing his feelings toward her. She stirred him, of course, for she was young and healthy and good to look at. That she cared for him, he knew—but what about Mattie Smith?

She seemed worried, too. One time he cut in with, "If I had a thousand bucks, Marcie, you could have them for your thoughts."

"Oh," she said. "Is it that bad?" She smiled slowly.

She did her shopping while Thoren visited the lawyer. Corporation papers had been filed and stock would be put up for sale. About sixty percent of it would be handled by the farmers and the other forty percent—"Jim Wing asked about some stock yesterday," said the lawyer.

Thoren doubted his ears.

He had a letter from Molly. He read it slowly, then wadded it up and stuck it in his pant's pocket. Well, what the hell, he thought. A man never could tell about a woman. But he had figured Molly—He reread the crumpled letter. All right, let her stay in Amarillo.

Still, it hurt him.

Marcie said, "Steve, you're worse than I was. I've spoken to you twice. Are you ready to go home?"

"Sure, Marcie." He smiled crookedly.

He was thinking, as they rode out, that Molly's letter hadn't hit him too hard, and he wondered why. Then he knew when he looked at Marcie. A meadowlark was singing, its yellow breast bobbing. Thoren took his horse in close. He put his arm around Marcie, and kissed her on the lips.

"That's getting to be a habit with you," she said.

He smiled. "Hope so, Marcie."

"You've got Molly, Steve. Don't get the valley to talking any more than it is. Mol-

ly'll want to cut my throat when she comes."

Thoren thought of telling her about Molly's letter, then changed his mind. A woman can know too much about a man's affairs, sometimes, he figured. Maybe later . . . but not now. He listened to the meadowlarks sing.

"Mattie Smith?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Nothing but a bad boy with a big importance—to hear him talk. But watch him, Steve." Her eyes were on him.

"I'm an ex-ranger," he murmured.

MACK DAVIS was patching a hole in the barn when they rode into the Davis farm. Thoren noticed that the dry weather was cutting into the crops. Davis' wheat was stooling out, and it needed rain now to bring out full heads. The place looked dilapidated, Thoren noticed.

Wing rode in the next forenoon. Thoren asked, "Where's your body-guard, Wing?"

"Home," said Wing shortly.

Thoren was helping the carpenter with flooring. Wing stood inside the unfinished cabin, said, "Going to stack up to be a nice cabin, Thoren." He added, "I bought forty percent of that irrigation stock."

"An investment?" asked Thoren. "Might turn out to be a poor one, Jim Wing. You can't control the project, you don't own enough stock. What's your reason for buying in?"

"You're blunt, Thoren."

Thoren said, "Damn it, Wing, I have to be! You and I have been beating around this same bush for some time. Let's lay our cards on the table!"

"Good idea." Wing crouched on his thighs, thin and wiry. "We both got off to a wrong start, Thoren. I had a little whiskey in me that day in Wishbone when I got mad at Marcie Davis."

Wing turned a nail idly between thumb and forefinger. "Cattle running, as we knew it, is over with, Thoren. It took me some time to see that. I don't figure Martin Strong would've ever seen it. Well, Strong's out of the picture, now."

Thoren listened, rather surprised. Wing was having some of his cowboys take up homesteads along the creeks and hay-meadows. Here he would raise his winter feed,

sowing alfalfa and clover and leaving some in native bluejoint. He'd irrigate this and cut it and stack it.

"But the day of the open range is gone, Thoren. Hell, I got eyes. More settlers'll come in—this Wishbone Basin will be homes and lanes and schools. But back there—" He gestured toward the encircling mountains. "—there'll be always be range, grass in the forest. A man can run his cattle there in summer and feed down below in winter. Might run less head but it'll be better stock. I'm gettin' in some good Hereford bulls from the East to breed up better beef. I'm damn' tired of fightin', Thoren."

Thoren was silent as he pounded a nail. He didn't know what to think. And then he remembered the stolen cattle that had gone over the Pass, and that he had seen Jim Wing in Dogtown. Maybe this was a move to put the basin's farmers off guard and then move against them with fire and guns in one last attempt to run them off.

"We hold another meeting tonight, Wing. At the schoolhouse."

Jim Wing smiled crookedly. "As a big stockholder, I reckon I should be there. Some of them farmers will die of shock to see me walk in!"

Thoren rode to the schoolhouse with Marcie and Mack Davis. He left the girl at the back of the room and went up to the front where his committee sat with the lawyer. Most of the farmers were already there—for they would have a box social later—but some still were coming in. Jim Wing and Mattie Smith entered. Smith saw Marcie, sat down by her, but Jim Wing came to the front of the room, the gazes of the hoemen on him. He nodded at Thoren and took a seat on a bench beside a fat woman.

Thoren called the meeting to order. The discussion took some time, for he had to explain how much the water would cost, how the upkeep of the project would be financed, and other financial details. He introduced Wing, and the cowman made a short, abrupt speech, then left with Mattie Smith. The meeting broke up at midnight.

"Where's Mack?" asked Thoren.

Marcie said, "He went home early—he didn't feel well." The moonlight was bright across the sage and greasewood, reflecting from the shiny new barbwire.

"Looks like peace at last," murmured Thoren.

"I don't know, Steve," Marcie spoke slowly. "I can't quite understand Jim Wing, and his sudden change of mind. Is he cooking up something? I wonder. . . ."

Thoren shrugged. "I've thought of that, Marcie. But I can't see where he would profit. Me, I can't quite understand his move, either. Only thing it looks like is that he's seen the handwriting and has changed his tactics."

"Thoren—" She stopped suddenly.

He waited patiently. Then, "Well?"

"When is Molly coming?"

He was a little surprised. He had a sudden feeling that she had meant to say something else, and that, at the last moment, she had changed her mind. And Molly was good to use as conversation material.

"I don't know," he said.

"You don't know. Why. . . ."

"Forget it," he said, almost roughly.

She frowned, turned her horse, rode into the yard. Thoren noticed that the lamp was lighted in the kitchen. That meant that Mack Davis was still up, or he had left the light burning for his sister.

The carpenter called from the brush as Thoren came in. Thoren identified himself and the man came out, carrying his rifle. "Thoren," he said, speaking in his slow accent, "I thought I heard cattle moving, off somewhere. About two hours ago, I'd say."

Thoren felt a stab of something. The sounds, the carpenter said, had come from the north. No, he hadn't investigated; he'd stayed close to the cabin—nobody was burning it down while he was around. No, he hadn't seen any cattle, nor any riders, either. Thoren frowned.

Thoren turned and rode north across the plateau. But the moonlight, although bright, would not afford enough light for clarity. He did make out some cattle spores, though. The carpenter was right. While he had been at the meeting, stolen cattle had moved across his range, evidently heading for Dogtown and the slaughter house there. And with a two hour start—

He rode to the top of the pass. Here the wind was cold, whipping against him, cutting into him. Nothing moved below him as far as he could see. Yonder in the distance he saw the lights of Dogtown. He

thought of riding down to the slaughter pens and then discarded this thought. By the time he got there, the cattle might be butchered. They'd run stolen beef through hell-for-leather.

He turned toward home. Suddenly, below him, he saw a lone rider—a rider heading back into Wishbone Basin. He watched the horseman ride out of sight. What was Marcie Davis doing on this wild range at this hour of the night?

CHAPTER FOUR

Rustlers Wanted—Dead!

NEXT morning he strung wire. He had all the fence-posts in and all he had to do was stretch and staple the barbwire. He pulled Johnson off the house job and had the Swede help him with the fence.

Sheriff Harkness rode up as they spliced some wire. "Jim Wing claims he lost around a hundred head the last few days, Thoren." The lawman scratched his head slowly, plainly perplexed. "I don't like to think it, Thoren, but there's nothing else to think, now."

"Wing's foxy," murmured Thoren.

"Sly as a coyote," agreed Harkness. "But damn it 'hell, Thoren, what would be his game? When Strong was here, Wing could blame his losses on him, but Strong ain't here no longer. It must be the nesters."

"Or else an outside gang," said Thoren. "There's a slaughter house at Dogtown. Where does it get its beef? And Dogtown takes a lot of meat, too."

"I'm goin' to investigate that slaughter house," promised Harkness. He rode off.

Johnson looked at Thoren and asked, "Why didn't you tell him about those tracks and that herd I heard?"

Thoren scowled. "He might just bungle things," he said. "He ain't got much between the ears."

They finished the fence the evening of the second day. Now it was complete with gates and the wire was taut. The next bunch of stolen cattle, Thoren thought, will go through a cut fence.

A rider came up over the ridge. Mack Davis pulled in, said, "Got your fence all up, Thoren?"

Thoren nodded.

Davis looked at it, then switched the talk

to other affairs. He was more congenial than Thoren had ever seen him.

A week later Thoren met Jim Wing in Wishbone.

"Lose any more cattle, Wing?"

Wing looked at him sharply. "How did you know, Thoren?"

Thoren informed him that Sheriff Harkness had told him. Wing was quiet, tough. "No more since that night, Thoren. Those sodbusters better watch their midnight raids or the guns of me an' my riders—"

Thoren asked, "How about yourself, Wing?"

"What do you mean?"

"You claim friendship for the farmers, you've changed your ways. But have you? Maybe you didn't lose any cattle. . . ."

Wing's jowls were hot with blood. "You implyin' I might just be sayin' I lost cattle, an' I ain't lost 'em? That I'm sayin' that to make trouble with the farmers. By hell, Thoren, I oughta—"

"Hang onto yourself." Thoren smiled faintly.

Wing's anger fell back. "Would there be an outside bunch, Thoren? A gang, back in the mountains, sendin' my beef into Dogtown. When Strong was here, I figured mebbe he'd stole it. You got me wrong on this farmer deal. I'll work with the hoemen if they work with me. But stealin' my stock—"

Thoren was puzzled. The man sounded honest. And cattle had moved over the pass, the hoofprints told him that. Then he remembered seeing Jim Wing in Dogtown that day. All this added up to nothing.

He went to Harkness' office. The lawman had deputies watching the slaughter house, but so far all its business had been legitimate. "You've been a ranger, Thoren. You know a lot more about this business than I do." He lifted worried eyes.

Thoren had a sudden hunch. He asked the man to pull off his deputies and play his cards close for a while. "Whoever's doin' this stealin might get suspicious," he said. "And stop rustlin'. We want to catch them with the goods."

"All right," said Harkness.

Thoren had a boot in his stirrup when the lawyer called to him. Corporation proceedings were complete, he said, and there'd be another meeting at the school house—

the final meeting before the regular monthly meetings fell into swing.

Thoren rode out. This meeting would see the thing started, see the fresnos and teams swing into action, building the dam and the ditches and turn-outs. He stopped at the Davis farm to tell Marcie and Mack. The meeting, he said, would be held tomorrow night. Both promised to be there—to ride with him to the schoolhouse, in fact.

The morning was spent helping the carpenter. Early afternoon found him riding Jim Wing's range. Cattle were moving down out of the brush, running down the mountainsides.

Thoren saw the rider up on the ridge. The man saw him and rode down.

"Hot weather to move cattle," murmured Thoren.

Mattie Smith said, "Boss' orders, Thoren. Got to get them down on the salt licks for a day or two."

Thoren turned his horse, stopped. "I suppose Jim Wing knows about the meeting tonight at the schoolhouse?"

"He does."

Thoren looked at the cattle grouping below him, nodded, and rode south. He saw Sheriff Harkness in Wishbone. "Maybe you better watch that slaughter house tonight after all," he said. "Get some men in the brush and watch, Harkness."

"Somethin' up, Thoren?"

Thoren lifted his shoulder. "Maybe."

HHE RODE back to his homestead. Unrest boiled inside of him. On each night that a meeting had been held, when farmers crowded the schoolhouse and the range was devoid of eyes, the cow thieves had moved cattle across his land. Would they do it tonight?

When dusk came, he and the carpenter talked briefly, and then he went for his horse. The carpenter went into the brush, carrying his rifle. On the ride to the schoolhouse, Thoren said little. Marcie was chattering but Mack Davis was quiet.

Farmers were still coming in. Thoren waited, finally called the meeting to order. Jim Wing sat in the front row. Thoren looked up, saw that the cowman was gone. He excused himself, went outside.

Darkness held the rangelands. Thoren got his horse, stepped up, looked over the

broncs tied there. Marcie's horse was there but Mack Davis' cayuse was gone. Probably pulled loose and was grazing nearby, thought Thoren.

He took the high ridges, riding fast. Once, below him, he saw a rider—a man who pushed toward the western pass, riding hard. Thoren could not recognize him, the night was too thick. And the rider too far away.

Below him, Wishbone Basin slept in almost total darkness. Only a few lights pinpointed the basin's floor. Most of the valley's inhabitants were at the schoolhouse. Thoren wondered if he were playing a cold hunch.

He put the black out, running him through the rocks. He drew in once, keening the cold mountain wind for sounds. But only the purr of the wind in pine and spruce met his ears. The black felt the hooks again.

He rode into his homestead by the south gate. The carpenter waited by the shack, squatting there in the darkness. Thoren asked, "What do you know?"

"Nothing, Thoren. No sounds, no cattle, no men."

Thoren felt the pull of unrest. They went into the brush, following the fence. They came to the meadow and Thoren moved across the space, taking the north side. He settled there, the carpenter opposite him. The wind was cold and he pulled his jumped closer. He laid his Winchester .30-30 across his knees.

An hour passed.

Overhead, an owl hooted, then flew away, wings flapping. Jim Wing had left the meeting, Thoren thought, but why would he steal his own cattle? Yet, that was logical. Maybe Wing hadn't changed color; maybe he just acted that way.

He thought he heard a sound on the slope above him. Maybe a cougar, there were some around here. The moonlight was soft, washing over the meadow. Thoren shifted, leg-muscles tired.

No dice, he thought, no dice.

Suddenly he heard a cow low. The sound came from the west, down on the slope. He glanced across at the carpenter, throat dry. Ten minutes later, steers broke through the brush, trotting into the meadow. Now a rider came loping up. He leaned down and cut Thoren's wires. The cattle ran through. The man sat his horse, watching them pass.

Thoren thought, Jim Wing, without a doubt.

Now another rider, half-hidden by dust, could be seen tailing the herd. Thoren recognized one cow—a spotted-faced bony heifer. He had seen her in the bunch that Mattie Smith had turned down to the salt licks. Jim Wing, and Jim Wing's cattle. Did that make sense?

Thoren walked forward out of the brush. He called, "All right, you two men! This is Steve Thoren talking! You cut my fence and I—"

The man in the lead was firing. His horse was rearing, his sixgun flashing. Sod plowed upward at Thoren's boots. Thoren went to one knee, squat on the ground, and drew a fast bead, jerking his lever at the same moment.

Cattle were running, now—running blindly, stampeding from the gunfire. They rolled across the meadow, kicking dust high. Thoren ran forward, rifle up. The rider was getting away, abandoning his cattle. Now another rifle came into the fray. The carpenter is firing. Thoren thought, and then saw that the rifle was above the spot where the carpenter had been stationed. But maybe the man had moved to higher ground.

Dust still hid the man at the drags. Thoren ran ahead, breaking through it. A cow came running, saw him, snorted and dipped, missing him. Thoren came out of the dust. The rider was ahead, limned against the moon. Thoren stopped, knees heavy. The rider was Mack Davis!

Thoren wiped his brow. Marcie's brother!

The rider was gone, then. Brush claimed Mack Davis and his horse, and Thoren knew they could never trail him in that mountain wilderness of lava and high buck-brush. Thoren turned, rifle talking. The carpenter had driven the lead man back, and Thoren dropped him from his horse, plunging him to the ground.

The last of the cattle passed, and Thoren heard the distant crash of posts breaking. They had stampeded through his west fence. He went to the man he had dropped, expecting to find Jim Wing. But the still, dark face of Mattie Smith stared up at him.

A man came running, rifle out.

Thoren said, "Jim Wing?"

Wing breathed heavily. "Mattie Smith, eh? Got to figurin' he was stealin' my stuff! Who was that other, Thoren? I couldn't make him out!"

"Neither could I," said the carpenter.

Thoren said, "I couldn't either, men." He added, "Smith looked like you, Wing."

Wing was talking excitedly. He'd sneaked out of the meeting, headed across country. Lots of things were clear to Thoren now. But he kept them to himself. Mack Davis, missing two water meetings, saying he was sick. Wing in Dogtown, suspecting that slaughter house of receiving stolen beef. And probably suspecting him, Thoren, of stealing it, because he had seen him in Dogtown.

Thoren said, "You men will take charge here?"

Wing said, "Yes," and knelt beside Mattie Smith. "This bucko's dead, Thoren. No use in tryin' to trail that other, I guess. Sure like to know who he was, though."

THOREN rode down the valley. He met Marcie Davis in her yard. "The meeting is over," she said. "Where did you go, Steve?"

He stood beside her. "They tried to run cattle across my land. Jim Wing, my carpenter, and I stopped them, Marcie. Mattie Smith is dead."

"Oh, God. And Mack?"

"You knew all the time?"

"Mack, quick!"

Thoren said, "He rode out, unhurt. I could have dropped him, but I wouldn't. Why did he do it, and why didn't you tell me?"

"How could I tell you? He was my brother! He rode twice with Mattie, then wanted to stop, but Mattie—" She was sobbing.

"You could have told me, Marcie. I almost shot him from his horse."

She raised her head. "I almost did, once. Then I switched the talk to Molly. You'll never tell, Steve?"

"No. He'll probably never come back. Of course, people will wonder where he went, but we can make up some logical story."

"We?"

Thoren kissed her. "Molly isn't coming," he said.



Pete's body was hurtling through the air before he could bring his rifle up.

By James Shaffer

NANCY BANKS tossed her head impatiently. "Why don't you admit it, Pete?" she said angrily. "You're not interested in a steady job. You're not even interested in working."

"Now, that ain't so," Pete Calloway defended himself. "You know the thing I want to do is get enough money for us to get married on."

"Then why won't you take the horse wrangling job with Old Man Johnson?" the girl demanded. "He pays well, and it would be steady."

"Now, honey," Pete groaned, "we been over this so many times." He began counting off on his fingers. "We want to get married, don't we? And we want a little place of our own, don't we? A place like the Horton place—"

"But you won't work to get it," the girl countered. "You're full of schemes to make a big pot of money all at once. Only your schemes never work out—and you come out the short end. How about that deal with that gold prospector? You lost two hundred dollars. And then there was that irrigation scheme. You lost six months savings—"

Pete groaned inwardly. Wouldn't she ever forget those two—uh, unfortunate deals? Suppose he had lost a little money in each one of them? Pete figured he'd gained valuable experience; knowledge that would keep him from losing money in future deals. He sighed. There was no other customer in the Golden Nugget Cafe, where Nancy worked, and ordinarily, this would have been a swell time for him to lean over

BOOTHILL'S BLOOD-MONEY

Deputy Pete Calloway's dream dimmed out when that recklessly ambitious lawman had to make his choice between a bounty large enough to buy his ranch, and tangling with a back-shooting boss, who boasted to all the world that he was all-round hell-on-the-kill!

the counter for a kiss. But he suspected he'd get a slap, instead so he stayed right where he was.

The front door rattled open and a man stepped inside. He had thin, tight lips, narrow set eyes, and his hands didn't seem to want to get too far from the guns on his hips. His narrow eyes lit up at the sight of Nancy, and he gave a long, low whistle. Pete's blood boiled.

"The gal I been dreaming about," the stranger said. "Gimme anything you got on the menu—if them lovely hands of yours touch it—it's bound to taste good."

"There's no malarkey on the menu," Nancy said testily.

"Aw, now, honey," the man protested. "I'm gonna be in town a few days, and I need some companionship—"

"You heard what the lady said," Pete cut in roughly. "Order from the menu only."

The man turned, and Pete saw cruelty flicker in his eyes. "Don't remember addressing any remarks at you, fellow. And where I come from a man don't speak till he's spoken to."

"And in this part of the country," Pete retorted, "we don't give the same line of talk to ladies that we do to dance hall girls. I don't think you're as hungry as you thought. You'd better mosey—"

The man came off the counter stool with a snarl on his face. "A little pistol whipping would do you good—"

But Pete was in no mood for dallying. His long legs carried him forward with

flashing speed, and his fist sunk into the man's stomach. The stranger yelped a curse and staggered back, this time intent on getting his gun out for shooting purposes. Pete crowded him, though. He backed him against the wall, and shot a left and a right to the face. The man sagged, and Pete laid one on his chin.

He spun him around, grabbed him by the nape of the neck and seat of his pants and rushed him to the door. The man was muttering curses as Pete hurled him out into the street. On the sidewalk the stranger whirled, his gun half drawn—until he saw Pete's gun was already out. He stalked off down the street.

"As usual," Nancy Banks sighed. "Always fighting—always in trouble."

"But I had to," Pete protested. "I couldn't allow him to shoot his lip off."

"I know," the girl replied, "and that's what I'm trying to tell you, Pete, honey. If we were married, and I was cooking just for you—Pete, say that you'll take the job with Old Man Johnson."

Pete hedged. "But, honey, think how long it would take to get the down payment on the Horton Place."

"You just don't love me enough to go to work and get things for me, Pete!"

"Aw, now honey, don't start that!" Pete said hastily. "Why, of course I love you."

"Then you'll take that job?" Nancy asked eagerly. "You'll go right out to Johnson's today!"

"I'll go out and see Old Man Johnson," he said aloud, and then added under his

breath, "the doggoned, dirty old skinflint!" "Oh, Pete!" Nancy cried happily. "At last—I'll go right back to work on my wedding dress!"

PETE slouched glumly out of the Golden Nugget and walked up the street to his horse. With his foot in the stirrup, however, he hesitated. It was early in the morning, and it was only a short ride out to Johnson's. No need to rush; Johnson wouldn't pay him for that day's work, anyhow. And since he was going to buckle down, he might as well have a last beer or two before he put his nose to the grindstone. He took a look down the street to see if Nancy was looking, then headed for the Cowman's Delight saloon.

"A beer, Happy," he told the barkeep, "to celebrate me turning over a new leaf. From now on, I'm a different man. A sober, hard-working industrious gent, making his way in this world by the honest sweat of his brow—"

"Sheriff Gulledge was looking for you a few minutes ago," Happy Mosby cut in.

"H'mm," said Pete. He thought of the stranger he'd roughed up. Could that hombre have run and tattled to the law? He knew of no other reason the sheriff would want him, as he and the lawman weren't on the best of terms.

"Said he had a job for you," Happy went on. "Just the kind you like; no work and a chance at some big dinero—fast."

Pete's curiosity was further aroused. He had worked as Gulledge's deputy for a while, but he couldn't stomach the sheriff's ways. As a man, sworn to uphold the law, Gulledge seemed to have very little respect for it himself.

"Whatever it is," he murmured in his beer, "it's probably as crooked as a snake doubled up with the belly-ache. Me, I'm headed for Old Man Johnson's. I'll wrangle his horses and draw his pay. And I'll pinch my pennies till that Indian squawks—"

"Pete! I been looking all over for you," Sheriff Max Gulledge came through the batwing doors and up to the bar. "I got just the job for you." The sheriff was a big man, with a politician's false heartiness about him. He slapped backs, bought drinks, and smiled always. Only his eyes didn't smile; there was a cold cunning in

the back of them that never warmed up.

"Got me a job," Pete muttered. "Wrangling horses for Old Man Johnson."

"Expect me to believe that?" Gulledge's laugh boomed through the saloon. "At the wages Johnson pays—it wouldn't keep you in beer money. Now this job I got—"

"Is probably crooked," Pete said in a low voice.

Sheriff Gulledge managed, with an effort, to keep the smile on his face, though his eyes spoke plainly of his anger. He leaned closer to Pete.

"There's fifteen hundred dollars in this job for you," he said, "and it'll take less'n a week to earn it. Fifteen hundred iron men, Pete—think of it—by this time next week, you could own the Horton place—it'd be yours!"

That was exactly what Pete was trying not to think. He'd promised Nancy he'd go straight out to Johnson's. He was supposed to go to work that very day. He was through with quick-money schemes. A man got somewhere in this world by hard, honest toil—

"Today is Tuesday," Sheriff Gulledge went on, "by next Tuesday, you could wake up in the morning, look out the window—and the land you saw would be yours!"

"Old Man Johnson is waiting for me—" Pete started.

"The bank has had two offers for the Horton place lately," the sheriff said in an offhand voice. "And the bank can't hold the place forever—tain't good business."

Pete fidgeted nervously. That little Horton place was the best bargain he'd ever seen. Why, it had everything—a little creek running through it, a nice peeled log cabin already built, even a chicken house where a man could raise fresh eggs—

"Be kinda tough," Gulledge continued, "living here, and seeing somebody else owning the Horton place. 'Specially when a man knowed he could have owned it."

"I ain't wanting no part of your crooked schemes, Gulledge," Pete said, but his voice was hoarse and lacked conviction.

"Come over to my office—listen to the details," Gulledge said. "If you think it's crooked—" he shrugged, "ride on out to Johnson's."

There was nothing wrong with that, Pete mused. Couldn't be any harm in just

listening. He could still listen and then ride on out to Johnson's. And that, of course, would be exactly what he would do. Listen to the details of the job—then turn 'er down. Hard, honest work—that's what got a man places.

"Let's go."

There were two men in the sheriff's office, and the sight of one caused Pete to stiffen and bristle. It was the fast talking gent he'd kicked out of the Golden Nugget. The stranger came to his feet, scowling. Pete lunged, and Sheriff Gulledge grabbed him just in time.

"Is that the hombre you put so much faith in?" the stranger snarled. "He's the hairpin that hit me from behind over in the cafe."

"Turn me loose," Pete growled. "I'll bust his nose—"

"No fighting!" Gulledge said sternly, and the stranger subsided. The other stranger stood up. A big, red-faced man that reminded Pete a whole lot of Sheriff Gulledge.

"Pete," Gulledge said, "this is John Rykeman. He manages the Double Link ranch. You've heard of the ranch and Rykeman, both."

Pete's eyes narrowed. He'd heard of Rykeman, and the big Double Link ranch, all right. The ranch was owned by Eastern investors, and Rykeman managed it. Rykeman had a bad reputation, and the Double Link ranch was reputed to hire known gunslingers. A nice pair, he thought; Gulledge and Rykeman. This whole thing was beginning to smell bad.

"This is Lippy Reed," Rykeman said, introducing the fast talking stranger. "On my payroll."

"Maybe I better go on out to Johnson's after all," Pete grunted.

"Wait'll you hear it," Gulledge said soothingly. "Mr. Rykeman, tell Pete your troubles."

Rykeman cleared his throat. Whatever his troubles were, Pete thought, they were probably caused by overstepping the law.

"To make it short and sweet," Rykeman said, "a bookkeeper that I hired embezzled some of the ranch's funds. When I caught on to what he was doing, he skinned out—took to the hills." Rykeman paused dramatically. "I have to show my books to the owners, and this bookkeeper fixed the books to make it look like I was the crooked one."

Serves you right for hiring the kind of men you do, Pete thought, but he said nothing.

"We know this man is hiding in the Mustang Mountains," Rykeman went on, "and Sheriff Gulledge tells me you know those mountains like the palm of your hand."

Pete shot a glance at the sheriff. "The Mustangs are in another county," he said. "You got no jurisdiction in that county."

"Exactly why I had to come here," Rykeman cut in smoothly. "I went to the sheriff of my county. He took a look at the books and swore that I was the thief. He wouldn't even chase this man. To clear myself—I've got to capture this man."

"Rykeman's offering three thousand dollars out of his own pocket," Gulledge said. "It's an even split, Pete—fifteen hundred a piece."

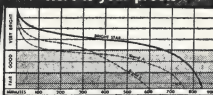
"Uh—I don't know—" Pete hedged.

Gulledge laughed. "You still think something's crooked. Hell, what? It's an open

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and shut case. We go out and catch this man. When we bring him in, Rykeman pays up three thousand. It's up to Rykeman to prosecute the man—not us. We just bring him in—”

“He took certain papers with him when he left,” Rykeman said. “It's those papers that will clear me—and convict him—”

Pete tried to think of Nancy, and the job at Old Man Johnson's. And then he heard Sheriff Gullede's words—“you look out the window and the land you see is yours.” And all that could happen in a week. He thought of Nancy. For all her urging to get himself a job, he knew she'd sure be happy if they could get married right away—with a place of their own to live on. He took a deep breath.

“Let's git going,” he said.

SHERIFF GULLEDGE pulled his sweat streaked horse to a halt. He cursed as his eyes roamed around. The Mustangs were a tangle of dim, rocky trails, brush that tore and ripped at a man's clothes, and no sign of human habitation.

“Three days of clawing our way through these mountains!” he said disgustedly. “And I thought you knew every trail—every hiding place!”

“I ain't liking the delay any more than you,” Pete said testily, thinking of Nancy. Already the job had taken longer than he'd expected, and by now, Nancy must have found out he hadn't gone to Johnson's. Inwardly, he cringed at the thought of facing her again. If this deal fell through—he tried not to think of the consequences. Old Man Johnson would be mad and wouldn't give him the job. And already, Pete was finding it hard to get jobs. Folks said he was too footloose to hold down a job.

“This is the same place we stopped night before last,” Gullede growled. “And we didn't find him then.”

“This hidden draw is the best hideout I know of,” Pete grunted. “And we found fresh campfires. I think our man saw us coming and vamoosed.”

“Well, we've made enough noise to scare him off this time, too!” Gullede snarled. They rode down into the small clearing and Pete pointed.

“A campfire made since we left the

other night!” he said triumphantly. “That proves it—he's around here somewhere! We'll dismount and scout around on foot. He can't keep out of our way forever—”

“Exactly why I won't try to elude you any longer,” a strange voice cut in coolly. The two whirled around in surprise. “Careful with that gun, Sheriff!” the voice crackled suddenly. “Better lift your hands high!”

The man who stepped out of the brush had once been dushly dressed, but the brush had ripped and torn his clothes badly. But there was nothing wrong with the firm set of his jaw, and the rocklike steadiness of the rifle he held.

“I reckon,” Pete grunted, “you're Chet Meade.”

“Correct,” the man replied, with a faint smile on his face. “The object of your tiresome and patient search. Now unbuckle your guns and let them drop. And Sheriff Gullede—I must warn you—you're much too anxious to get your hand on your gun.”

“You won't get away with this, you dirty crook!” Gullede snarled.

“I think I will,” Chet Meade grinned. “So far I've gotten away with everything I planned to do. I see no reason why I can't carry out the rest of my plan.”

“Meaning what?” Pete asked.

Chet picked up both gunbelts and slung them across his shoulder before answering. “Meaning to put John Rykeman in jail where he belongs for robbing the stockholders of Double Link cattle ranch.”

Pete sat down on a rock and cursed. “That's the way I thought it was,” he said mournfully. “A crooked deal from the start—and I won't get nothing from Rykeman.”

“Don't be a fool and fall for his line of talk!” Gullede raged. “Meade's the crook—not Rykeman. If he wasn't—why did he run and take to the hills? If Rykeman was the crook, he'd been the one to run, wouldn't he? Then why is Meade, here, afraid to go back?”

Pete scratched the dirt with a stick. That made sense. Maybe he was jumping to conclusions because of the fact he didn't trust Gullede, and the things he'd heard about John Rykeman.

“Afraid to go back?” Chet Meade echoed, with a laugh. “As a matter of fact, I was just—”

Pete flung the handful of dirt. The fugitive saw it coming and tried to dodge, and at the same time, get his rifle up. But the rifle was awkward, and before he could bring it up, Pete's body was hurtling through the air. Gullede, heavier and less active, got clumsily to his feet, roaring encouragement.

Pete knocked the rifle up and sprang under Meade's defenses. His hand closed around his own gunbutt and he twisted the gun free of leather. Meade was struggling to get the rifle up, when Pete jammed the Colt in his ribs.

"This thing's loaded," he snapped.

"So is the rifle," Chet Meade sighed ruefully, "but you could shoot quicker than I could." He dropped the weapon, while Pete took the other sixgun from him and shoved it in the waistband of his trousers.

"Nice going, Pete!" Gullede exulted. Meade sat down, and the sheriff leaped forward and aimed a kick at the captive's ribs. Pete shoved the lawman aside before he could deliver the blow.

"None of that stuff, Sheriff!" Pete growled. "I still ain't too sure that I'm taking this hombre in where Rykeman can get hold of him."

Meade chuckled. "As I was saying, just as I was so rudely interrupted," he said unconcernedly, "I was just about ready to ride in and give myself up."

"Huh?" Pete ejaculated.

"Watch him, Pete!" Gullede shouted. "He's tricky! I'll get a rope and tie him up!" He jerked a lasso from his saddle and then came over and got his sixgun from Pete's waistband. Chet Meade watched that with narrowed eyes.

"I didn't mind you holding the guns," he told Pete, "but I don't trust the sheriff."

"You dirty, sniveling crook!" Gullede roared. "I oughta plug you right now!"

"Probably what you intend to do—before we get back to town," the man said casually. He grinned disarmingly at the lawman. "In the first place, you've no legal right to arrest me in this county—and in the second," his voice lashed like a blacksnake whip, "Rykeman probably warned you not to let me get to town alive!"

The sheriff's face turned mottled red, then white with anger. With cold deliberation, he raised the Colt, the hammer clicking back.

"Hold it!" Pete snapped. He had a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach, as he realized the sheriff had fully intended to shoot. He had his own gun out, and the muzzle had swung toward the lawman. Gullede looked at Pete a long moment, then shrugged.

"No man talks to me like that," he growled.

Pete turned to Chet Meade. "You seem awful cocksure of yourself. How come you took to the hills, and now you're ready to got back and face the music?"

"Because it won't be me that faces the music," Meade stated simply. "I uncovered Rykeman's crookedness, but he caught me at it, and I had to run. But now I've fixed that." He grinned up at Sheriff Gullede. "I met a man in the mountains a few days ago, and I got him to mail a letter for me—to the U. S. marshal, telling him the whole works. The letter's had time to reach the marshal by now, and Rykeman will be afraid to pull any rough stuff. I was debating whether to surrender or not when you two came along."

Pete grunted. "All I know is that I was offered fifteen hundred dollars to lead the sheriff into these mountains and capture you. That's all I'm interested in. The legal fighting will be up to you and Rykeman when you get back."

"Hell, yeah, that's all we're after," Sheriff Gullede grunted. "Let's git some hot grub and start back. Pete, you git the firewood."

PETE nodded and left the clearing. Out of sight, he stopped and scratched his chin, worry creasing his brow. This whole deal was crazy. None of it made sense. Then he shrugged. He'd get his fifteen hundred—to heck with the rest of it. He started gathering wood, when he heard a rasping curse; then a loud yell and the roar of a gun.

He dropped the firewood and charged through the brush back to the clearing, his gun drawn and ready. But as he stepped into view, he didn't know whether he'd need the gun or not.

Sheriff Max Gullede was stomping around holding his right hand and making the air blue with profanity. Chet Meade had a small derringer dangling from his fingers, and a grin played on his lips.



Gulledge drew his gun.

"Drop it!" Pete commanded. "What the hell happened here?"

Chet Meade broke the little double barrelled derringer, ejected both the spent and live shell from it and tossed it over to Pete. Gulledge was still cursing and shaking his right hand. Pete bent down and picked up the sheriff's gun. The derringer slug had smashed it beyond use.

"Well?"

"Just what I thought would happen," Chet Meade said. "The minute you were out of sight, the sheriff went for his gun. I presume his intention was to kill me in cold blood."

Pete was getting madder by the minute. He whirled to Gulledge. "What about that, Sheriff? Talk, and talk damn fast!"

"Who you yelling at?" Gulledge roared, and when Pete's expression didn't change, he went on more calmly. "He tried to escape, damn it! I reached for my cutter and he dragged out that sneak gun."

"You can believe either story you want to," Chet said. "I had the derringer all the time, but I decided to keep it, just in case Gulledge tried a trick like that. You see, I'm still convinced that Rykeman made a deal with the sheriff, here, to make sure I didn't get back alive."

"That's a lie!" Gulledge snarled. "He was trying to escape, and now he's lying to make me look like a killer."

Pete swore feelingly. This whole business was getting crazier and crazier. He didn't

know where he stood in this mess, and what was worse, he was beginning to doubt whether he'd get that fifteen hundred. He was convinced of one thing: that Chet Meade wasn't as bad as he was painted. He turned to the ex-bookkeeper with a puzzled expression on his face.

"I'm taking you in, anyhow, savvy?" he grunted. "And then I'm collecting my fifteen hundred for doing it." He paused. "I've got my reasons for wanting that fifteen hundred."

"Glad to go in with you," Chet Meade said amiably, increasing Pete's confusion. "Just so long as you don't allow the sheriff to get his hands on any firearms."

"Like hell!" Gulledge snarled. "Pete, I'm in charge here. Gimme your gun—you can keep the derringer."

"That would be signing my death warrant," Chet Meade said without emotion.

"To hell with that tenderfoot punk," the sheriff grunted. "Gimme your gun, Pete, and we'll get going."

"We c'n get back to town without you having a gun," Pete hedged. "And I hate to loan my gun."

Gulledge took a deep breath. "Either you give me a gun—and I take charge here, or you get none of that reward money when we get back."

That was what Pete had been expecting and dreading. The fifteen hundred had been melting rapidly all the time, he felt, and now it was slipping completely out of his grasp. But he was convinced that Gulledge had tried to shoot Chet Meade.

"To hell with the whole damn mess!" he growled. "I'm sick of it. I'm gonna turn Meade loose—I won't get no reward money anyhow."

"No, no, don't do that!" Gulledge said quickly. "Why—I mean—after all the trouble we had capturing him."

Pete took a deep breath. "All right," he said, "if you don't want Meade turned loose, then you write me out a paper. Say on it that for assisting, helping, and aiding in the capture of Chet Meade, I'm due to git fifteen hundred dollars—write 'er out, Gulledge, or I'll chase Meade out of sight, myself."

The sheriff's eyes were pin points of hate as he dug a pencil stub and a wrinkled tally book out of his pocket. He scribbled industriously awhile, then handed it over.

Pete read it and stuck it in his pocket. "Let's go," he grunted.

Pete had expected a look of disappointment to show on John Rykeman's face when he and Guldge brought the prisoner in alive. But he was disappointed. Rykeman showed no disappointment, in fact, his red face revealed nothing but satisfaction.

"Nice work, Sheriff, and you too, Calloway," he said with a grin, lolling back in the sheriff's swivel chair.

"You won't think so when the U. S. marshal gets hold of you," Chet Meade broke in.

"Meaning what?" Rykeman asked.

"I got a letter off to the U. S. marshal, telling him the whole crooked deal, and sending him the papers that will convict you," Meade told Rykeman. "I also told the marshal that I was surrendering to the nearest sheriff—and that if I was killed, to investigate you, *thoroughly!*"

"How many letters did you send?" Rykeman asked blandly.

"Just one," Meade snapped back. "One was enough—I told the whole story in that letter."

Rykeman laughed heartily, and for the first time in a couple of days, Max Guldge laughed in a relieved sort of way. Pete flung his cigarette impatiently on the floor.

"To heck with all this palaver," he broke in. He was worried that Nancy

might have seen him ride in town and be right over. "I want my fifteen hundred!"

"You go right up to the bank and wait for me, Calloway," Rykeman said expansively. "As soon as we get Meade properly locked up, I'll be up there and give you my check."

PETE heaved a big sigh of relief. This was more like it. Maybe he could stay out of Nancy's way till he got the cash, then he could run over and show her—then head to the Horton place! His heart was thumping as he left the office.

But as he stepped onto the sidewalk he almost bumped into Lippy Reed. The shifty little gunman gave him a sour look and stepped aside.

"I got orders not to pick a fight with you," Reed growled.

"Yeah, that yellow streak up your back is giving them orders," Pete retorted and started up the street. But he'd only taken a step or two when he froze in his tracks. Chet Meade's voice, high pitched with anger and fear, came through the door of the sheriff's office.

"That's the man I gave the letter to!" Meade yelled in surprise. "He was to mail the letter to the marshal for me. What're you doing here?"

Rykeman's laugh was loud and boisterous with triumph. "You gave Reed ten dollars to mail that letter. He brought it to me—and I gave him a hundred not to mail it."



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25. **BIG-BOOK** 
WESTERN

His voice changed to a sneer. "So the U. S. marshal is going to protect you, eh? I'll teach you to meddle in my affairs! You weren't supposed to get to town alive, but that damn fool Calloway messed up the works."

Max Gulledge's voice broke in. "But since Meade only wrote one letter to the marshal—don't guess there's any harm done, eh, Rykeman?"

"I guess not," Rykeman said, and his next words carried a sinister note. "A man can be killed trying to escape from jail just as easy as he can be killed out in the mountains."

Pandemonium broke loose in the office. Pete heard Lippy Reed's high-pitched yell; Rykeman's heavy curse, and Max Gulledge's raging profanity. The roar of a gun drowned all other sounds then, and feet pounded in the corridor leading from the office to the row of cells. Pete whirled around and dashed headlong back in the office.

"The back door's locked!" Max Gulledge was yelling, "he can't get out!"

"I'm sorry, boss," Lippy Reed said, "but he was quick as lightning when he grabbed my gun."

"Don't worry," Rykeman laughed. "This is perfect. We got him cornered, and he'll die with a gun in his fist—a perfect alibi. Calloway!"

The word ripped out of Rykeman's throat like a pistol shot. The big ranch manager had half turned and saw Pete standing there in the doorway, drinking in every word.

"I kinda bust up your alibi, don't I?" It was all that Pete could think of to say, and right then, it sounded kind of silly. But he'd said it now.

Rykeman cursed. For a big man, he moved with lightning, blinding speed. His hand dipped for his gun. Pete gulped for air, and his knees suddenly wobbled. He sidestepped to regain his balance. Rykeman's gun roared and the slug whistled past the spot where Pete had been standing.

Then Pete's own gun was out, and leveling. He heard its roar, and saw Rykeman jerk and stumble backward.

Pete was aware that the office was a roaring hell of gunfire. Max Gulledge had bought into the play, and Lippy Reed had

drawn his left hand gun. But there was another gun blasting—a fourth gun—spewing flame and lead from the corridor—and Chet Meade's grim face was behind it.

It was over in a second. Lippy Reed suddenly doubled up like a sack of grain with a hole in it. Max Gulledge staggered back, clutching a bleeding shoulder, and yelling for mercy. Chet Meade stepped into the office. He went over and looked down at John Rykeman.

"Plenty dead," he said tersely, his forehead wrinkled.

"Oh, lordy!" Pete groaned and slumped down in a chair. Chet Meade looked at him worriedly.

"Are you hit?"

"I wish I was," Pete groaned. In a few mournful words, he told Chet the whole story. "And now I ain't got no job at Old Man Johnson's, and I ain't got no fifteen hundred to buy the Horton place."

He pointed to the feminine figure that was coming across the street with fast, determined strides. "When she gets here, I ain't gonna have no girl!"

He looked down at John Rykeman. "I'm the biggest fool that ever walked—like the fellow that killed the goose that laid nuggets for aigs—Rykeman was gonna pay me fifteen hundred dollars—and I shot 'im—"

Chet Meade laughed. "The stockholders of the Double Link will pay you that—I'll see to it myself."

"Huh?"

Chet went on. "My dad is the biggest stockholder in the ranch. We knew Rykeman was crooked, but we couldn't get proof. So I came out and took a job as bookkeeper to get the goods on him. But if it hadn't been for you—" He shuddered. "You'll get your money, Pete! Don't worry."

Pete brightened, then he looked at the small figure advancing ominously toward the office. He fidgeted nervously, then his nerve broke.

"I'll sneak back and hide in one of the cells—and you explain it to Nancy, huh?"

Chet Meade looked at the girl, and wiped sweat off his forehead. "Coward," he jeered, "don't leave me—it'll take us both to handle this job."

And it did!

Panhandle Powdersmoke Saga



Every night the wire was cut in a hundred places, and rustled cattle poured through. . . .

By Jhan Robbins

IN AUSTIN, TEXAS, the \$3,000,000 State House stands, massive and white, bleached like a steer skull by the glaring sun. Built in the 1880's, it serves the Lone Star state today both as a government building and as a grim monument to a

money to consider taking up the offer.

A syndicate of hard-boiled Chicago business men, backed by British money, finally took advantage of the offer. Forming a fifteen million dollar company, they moved into the Panhandle three years before the

Panhandle ranchers waged a desperate war, lasting a generation, over three million acres of Texas' finest cattle-range, for a stake worth fifteen million dollars—and the life of any stranger foolhardy enough to challenge its wire-barricaded might!

bloody battle that made Texas history.

In the middle 1870's, Texas offered three million acres of prime Panhandle grassland to anyone who would build a "suitably magnificent" capitol at Austin. It was a tempting plum, the finest ranching country in the West, but no Westerner had enough

statehouse was completed. With them, they brought "business methods"—and barbed wire.

Fiercely, the Texas cattlemen resented both. For a hundred years, the sweet grass range had been free, and stock moved widely over the plains. Now, some of the best

water in the Panhandle was blocked off by the syndicate's 2000 miles of four-wire fence. One section stretched 150 miles without a gate.

The syndicate was unmoved by the outspoken opposition. Twenty thousand longhorns were shipped in the first fall, trains of heavy freighters lumbered over the plains, hauling in supplies, and some fifty top hands were hired away from enraged ranchers in the vicinity. To facilitate mass branding, Barbecue Campbell, the first manager, devised a method of moving cattle singly through narrow chutes, where they were stamped while standing up. The back-breaking roping and tying were eliminated.

Ab Blocker designed the brand. He chose the letters XIT. They had no meaning, but they looked well. Campbell tried to hire Blocker, a famous cattle-trail driver, as a permanent employee. Blocker's reply was to spit scornfully in the direction of the new-fangled cattle chute. "Hell no!" he snorted. "I wouldn't work for an outfit that don't even know how to brand cattle!"

From the first year, there was open war. The XIT's troubles were two-fold: ranchers, fighting for their way of life, cut the barbed wire, started prairie fires, poisoned water holes and fought pitched battles with XIT riders. On the other side of the fence, the XIT's Chicago bosses John and Charles Farwell made life on the big ranch so miserable, that their own riders rustled and cheated without compunction.

Knowing nothing about the West, the Farwells tried, with one stroke of the pen, to eradicate traditions that were decades old. One rule that stung deeply provided that travelers who stopped overnight on XIT land must pay for food and grain. It was at a line camp on the southern boundary that the edict was first presented. Zeb Crawlins, a grizzled veteran of the Indian wars and a respected rancher in his own right, bedded down for the night in an XIT bunkhouse. Outside, his four horses nibbled at a mound of grain. In the morning, the "guest" was presented with a neatly prepared bill for eighty-five cents.

Zeb said slowly, "This 'pears to me to be a mighty poor idee, and one I don't aim to establish." And drawing his sixgun, he held the bill at arm's length and shot it full of holes, while the humiliated riders looked on in silence. The bill was never paid.

On the XIT, cowpokes were treated as office employees, and they didn't like it. Card-playing, swearing and drinking were prohibited. Men were required to fill out work reports, keep inventories and sign payrolls. They were expected to go to church on Sunday, and not to town on Saturday night. The free-living riders chafed under the restrictions. They interpreted the new order as a sign that the XIT suspected them of disloyalty. Consequently, they felt free to be disloyal.

And always, on both sides of the fence, there were the rustlers. In a burst of business virtue, the XIT banned the branding of dogies or strays on its own range and sent out nosey patrols to make certain that no XIT stock was purloined elsewhere. From then on, many outraged cattlemen considered it more duty than crime to steal from the syndicate. Within two years, Barbecue Campbell quit under fire. Besieged by the worst period of cattle rustling in Western history, the big ranch was a hell-hole, riddled with thieves and outlaws. Many of the worst were on the payroll.

Campbell's last card against the rustlers was a tough, bristling cattle detective from Austin, who was hired at the fancy salary of \$300 a month to stop the raids.

Gifted with a sensitive nose, he boasted to the reassured Campbell, "I kin smell a stolen cow a mile away." Unerringly, he located a fat and choice herd hidden in the Oklahoma panhandle and drove them triumphantly back to the XIT. Pleased, the Chicago bosses gave him a sturdy bonus, sent him out again.

But at the end of six weeks, a strange discrepancy was noted. As fast as the detective returned the stolen stock to the main herd, they disappeared again. It became clear to the disgruntled manager that his ace detective was recovering rustled stock by day and himself rustling at night. Disgusted, the colorful Barbecue resigned.

HIS successor was A. G. Boyce. A former cattle trailer himself, he was made of sterner stuff than the stampeded Campbell, and his loyalty had been bought high. He purged rustlers from the XIT payrolls by the simple expedient of firing every one on the ranch and building up a new outfit from scratch.

This move increased the syndicate's

sworn enemies, for many of the riders he fired had never stolen a cow, yet their dismissal branded them publicly as rustlers.

By 1895, the main ranchhouse had been twice burned to the ground, and every night the wires went down in a hundred places as stolen cattle were rustled off the XIT range. Texas Ranger Ira Aten, with Wood Saunders and Ed Connell, his famous deputies, patrolled the New Mexico-Oklahoma border, yet the rustlers kept coming, growing bolder all the time.

Once Aten saw a dripping cowhide swinging on the western fence. Attached to it was an impudent note: "We're camped in the canyon. Come over and eat some fresh beef—if you feel lucky." Prudently, he ignored the invitation. For ten years, he stuck to his unhealthy job. In that time, more than a score of rustlers were hanged, hundreds more were killed in running gun fights. Aten rapidly became the West's number one target, but it was his successor John Armstrong who was shot to death in 1908 as he crossed into the Oklahoma panhandle on a rustler's trail. And the depredations grew worse. That year, of the fabu-

lous, fine-blooded herd of 150,000 cattle, fully 10,000 disappeared. XIT, for all its great size and powerful backing, staggered under the raids, and red ink showed on its ledgers.

Fundamentally, it was the enormous acreage of the 250-mile long grassland empire that worked against it. Even divided as it was into seven sub-ranches, it was just too big to handle. No manager, even the astute Boyce, could possibly keep track of 7500 square miles of territory. Strange things occurred on its hidden ranges.

Once owner John Farwell picked up his morning newspaper in Chicago and was electrified to read an advertisement inserted by a townsit that was bidding for settlers. "Thriving Texas town in heart of Panhandle," it began, "good water, fine soil, five established trading stores, home and commercial lots available cheap."

Investigation disclosed to the unbelieving Boyce that the village had been in existence for three years. Located at the headwater of one of the ranch's largest streams, it had been staked out openly with no attempt at subterfuge. Its residents claimed never to

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have heard of the XIT ranch. When the courts ordered the town to recognize the ranch as landlord, it complied meekly. Too meekly, Boyce discovered, for the families who lived there simply took to rustling XIT cattle in order to pay the rent.

Another story still told at the annual Dalt, Texas, reunion of XIT cowpokes concerns the new rider who was determined not to be impressed by the magnificence of XIT. Bombarded by statistics of its great size, he still seemed unable to grasp its immensity. Finally Boyce, irritated at the newcomer's cool sophistication, said sharply, "Why don't you take a little tour of the ranch before dinner?"

The new hand nodded thoughtfully and rode off. He did not return for supper. At the end of a week, Boyce, figuring that the man had skipped, took his name off the payroll. But as the second week drew to a close, the skeptical cowpoke limped his horse back into the main ranch yard. The animal was covered with mud, the rider with a stubby growth of beard. Both were worn to the point of exhaustion. But the new hand was still not humbled. As he fell from his saddle and was carried into the bunkhouse, he opened one eye and said la-

conically, "Nice little spread you've got here."

But the world's largest ranch was too ungainly to be profitable. The depression of 1910, when the bottom fell out of the beef market, finished the job the flaring torches and angry guns of embattled Texans had begun 27 years ago. The vast acres were parceled out, mostly to incoming nesters, the Chicago syndicate liquidated.

The men who fought the XIT actually licked it. But it was a hollow victory if they hoped to preserve the open range, for the barbed wire—hated symbol of the great Panhandle ranch—had come to stay. As nesters' plows bit into the bloody levels of the XIT, the ranching methods developed by Barbecue Campbell and A. G. Boyce were taken up by smaller outfits all over the West. As long as the XIT practiced range rotation, fencing, irrigation, and scientific breeding, hard skinned Texas ranchers condemned them as "new fangled". But only wide-scale imitation of the syndicate's methods made possible the development of America's greatest era of cattle ranching. Only the purple-faced cowpokes who spent the next twenty years digging post-holes continued to curse the XIT.

TREE OF DEATH

AT HOLCOMB VALLEY, in San Bernardino county, California, stands "The Tree of the Living Cross," an immense pine that marks the scene of an early-day duel. Particulars of the fight are not generally known outside the vicinity.

In 1860 Holcomb Valley was the scene of a fairly important gold rush. What the influx lacked in volume it made up in violence. In the wild excitement of discovery, a Greek and a Chinaman selected the same site for their mining operations and staked the same claim. Each maintained that he had arrived first on the scene. Egged on by other miners with a lust for excitement, the two contenders agreed to settle the matter in a duel with knives.

At the appointed hour the entire camp turned out to watch the show. A space was marked off under a huge pine. At a given signal, the duelists leaped at each other's throats, knives gleaming. For ten minutes they slashed and sparred. The onlookers shouted and cheered and laid bets on the outcome. Both men were bleeding copiously, when, with a final lunge, they closed on one another and both dropped to the ground, mortally wounded.

The spectators buried the duelists where they had fallen and, to mark the spot, used their knives to hack a deep cross on the bark of the pine. Today, eighty-six years later, encroaching bark has softened the edges of the scar, but the cross is still readily visible. Sleeping peacefully in a single grave beneath the tree, lie the two men from opposite ends of the earth, who came to the New World seeking riches and instead, found death.

—Nell Murbarger



TRAIL BLAZERS *of the* FRONTIER

• DRAMATIC HIGHLIGHTS IN THE LIVES OF OUR PIONEERS •

by CEDRIC W. WINDAS



One of Buffalo Bill's most dramatic adventures occurred when riding as scout for General Merritt's cavalrymen in 1876. Seeing two dispatch riders being cut off near War Bonnet Creek by Cheyennes, Cody took 15 troopers and rode to their rescue.



Racing at a furious gallop, Cody got between the dispatch riders and the Indians. Chief Yellow Hand shouted to the scout "I know you, Ta-ho-has-ka (Long Hair). Come and fight with me!" Buffalo Bill accepted the challenge.

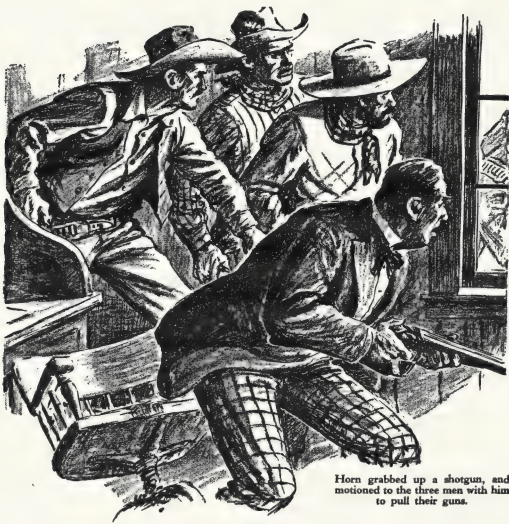


The duellists galloped towards each other at full speed. When thirty paces from his enemy Cody killed the Chief's horse with a quick rifle shot. At the same moment his own mount stepped into a prairie-dog's hole and fell, but the scout rolled clear.



He came to his feet as the chief opened fire on him but missed. Cody fired and Chief Yellow Hand dropped badly wounded. Buffalo Bill leaped on him and buried a knife in the Indian's heart, once again demonstrating Cody's remarkable prowess in hand-to-hand combat.

ROLLING the DEVIL'S



Horn grabbed up a shotgun, and motioned to the three men with him to pull their guns.

CHAPTER ONE

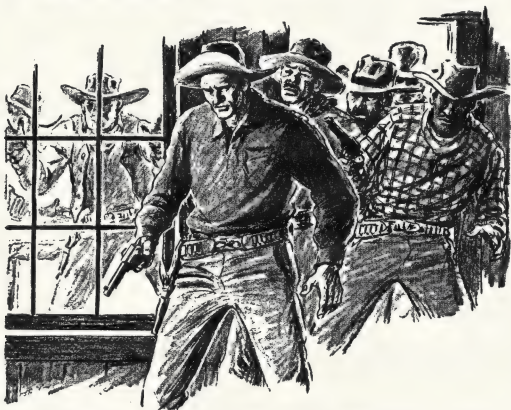
Gold-Camp Challenge

Mike Malone battled the hirelings of the mighty gun-king of Gold Town with all the fury within him, in a frantic attempt to save his thousand hell-bound cords of logs. For in that pot was the freedom of a hundred honest miners—and the lives and future of the only folks Mike could call friends!

MIKE MALONE caught the movement of a horse in the timber east of his wood camp, and briefly glimpsed a green jacket in the morning sun before the girl disappeared into the pines.

"Watch things, Parson," he said, and

FREIGHT By Wayne D. Overholser



A Smashing Novelette of Death on the Hell-Raising Frontier

driving his axe into a butt cut, strode rapidly upstream along Camp creek and circled into the timber.

Jenny O'Doone was waiting for him beside her horse. She was a tall, willowy girl whose blue eyes had lighted a fire in Mike's heart a year ago—a flame that had never gone out. She smiled when she saw him, her red lips full and inviting, but when he reached for her, she slapped him hard across the cheek, and would have slapped him again but could not because he pinned her arms to her sides, and held her that way while he kissed her hard.

"I hate you," Jenny cried when he let her go.

"Sure. Women have been saying that to men since Adam sneaked up on Eve and kissed her in the Garden of Eden." Mike stepped back, his grin wide and quick, one

gray eye closing momentarily in a wink. "Don't tell me you don't like my kisses. A fair trade it was, too, a kiss for a slap."

Anger went out of Jenny as it always did where Mike Malone was concerned. She said in pretended severity, "A man has no right to kiss a woman until they're engaged."

"Well, ain't we engaged?" Mike demanded. "If I catch a man making sheep's eyes at you, I'll bust him, see?" Mike rolled up the sleeves of his red shirt, flexed his hard, black-haired forearms. "I'll bust him and throw the pieces of him over Bull Mountain."

Her smile returned as she watched him, a wide-bodied man who leaned forward on his toes, hunching his great shoulders a little, huge hands fisted at his sides. She said, "You're the old he-wolf himself, one

aren't you, Mike? Or I should say the old bull. I wonder if they named Bull Mountain after you?"

"Sure," he growled, "but ain't we engaged?"

"We'll never be engaged until you patch up your troubles with Bill. You know that."

"I won't be kept away from my girl because she has a tough brother," Mike said sharply. "If I've got to give him a licking to make him see sense, then I'll sure give him a licking."

"You may have to," Jenny said, her face sober now, "or he'll lick you." Her eyes searched his, and she added, "You're stubborn, Mike, and no good can come of it unless you use a little judgment with it."

"Did you ride up here from Gold Town for me to kiss you or to tell me I'm stubborn?" Mike demanded sharply.

"Neither. I came to tell you that Bill's on his way here now. If he brings his men with him, there's nothing you can do but fight."

"Bill would be all right if he had enough backbone to bust loose from Price Horn and his Protective Association."

"He'll never do that unless an earthquake hits him." Jenny stepped into the saddle, and sat there a moment, her eyes pinned on Mike as if she'd never see him alive again. "Mike, do you have to keep on fighting?"

"Would you love me if I quit?" Mike demanded.

"But you can't win," the girl said helplessly. "Not against Price Horn."

"I've got one thousand cords of wood cut and ready to move. I've got customers in Gold Town who will pay me the minute I deliver that wood, and I haven't paid Horn a nickel for protection."

"And you haven't delivered the wood," Jenny pointed out.

"Would you love me if I quit fighting?" Mike asked again.

For a long minute their eyes met. Then Jenny turned her head, murmured over her shoulder, "I guess I wouldn't, Mike," and rode away.

MIKE walked back to the wood camp more slowly than he had come to meet Jenny. He passed beside the long rows of cordwood piled along the creek bank, the smell of split pine in his nostrils, a mass

of long needles and twigs making a soft covering on the ground. He thought of Jenny O'Doone, of her brother Bill whose freight wagons hauled everything that came into Gold Town from The Dalles, and of Price Horn, self-appointed mayor of Gold Town whose organized toughs exacted a fat bounty from the miners for their "protection."

Another two weeks would decide how far Make's war with Price Horn would go. Or less if the high water came. Mike looked at the dark clouds over Bull Mountain, and grinned. It might be less than two weeks, all right. The spring rains were overdue, and from the look of the sky, they were on their way.

"You're getting lazier all the time, Mike," Parson Flint said as he kicked a cut loose and laid his saw over the log. "You tell us we've got fifty more cords to cut, and then you go gallivanting off to look at the scenery."

Mike couldn't tell whether they knew Jenny had been there or not. His eyes turned from Parson to Squint Hogan, then to Long Nose George who had winked at Parson so quickly Mike wouldn't see, and finally to big Mush Trevis.

Trevis spit on his hands, picked up the splitting maul, and then slowly let the handle slide through his fingers until it hit the ground. "I've been working too hard," he said sourly. "If the boss is lazy, I guess I got no need to work hard."

"By grab, that's right," Parson Flint agreed. "Let's knock off an hour and get some rest."

Squint Hogan cocked his head, took a look at the sky, and then opined, "It's gonna rain purty soon. Let's go back to the shack, and wait for the rain."

"What in hell's the matter with you ya-hoos?" Mike bellowed. "Git to work, or I'll . . ."

"You'll what?" Mush Trevis asked. "You've been out consorting with a female, and then you tell us to get back to work."

They laughed, the four of them, and Mike's face reddened. "All right. Bill O'Doone's on his way now. If any of you tell him Jenny was here, I'll pull your tongue out by the roots."

"She'll make you a purty bride, Mike," Parson said. "Gonna let me tie the knot?"

"I wish I had a handsome mug like

Mike's," Trevis said sourly, "and I'd get me a pretty girl like Jenny."

"Handsome you say?" Squint Hogan demanded. "There's nothing handsome about that face. Reminds me of the time we was having supper in Baker City, and Mike looked into the milk pitcher. Soured it, by damn, just 'cause the milk saw . . ."

"Here comes O'Doone," Mike said. "Take it easy. If he wants some fighting, I'll give it to him."

Bill O'Doone wheeled up in a buggy, gave the lines a twist around the whipstock, and stepped down. He was a tall man, a little older than Mike, with a shock of bright red hair. He looked around the half-circle of men, a contemptuous smile on his lips, and then fixed his eyes on Mike.

"You've got a lot of wood, Malone."

Mike nodded.

"The boys in town are mostly out of wood now," O'Doone went on. "Nobody in the business last year. Everybody trying to take gold out of the earth, and forgetting there are better ways of getting it."

"Like charging ten prices for freighting," Mush Trevis boomed.

O'Doone swung on him, the color in his cheeks growing. "I'll have no wood cutter challenging my freight rates," he snarled. "The miners get the food and clothing they need, and that's all I contract to do."

So a wood cutter can't challenge your rates," Trevis spit on his hands, and moved toward O'Doone.

"Stop it, you fool," Mike roared, waving a hand at Trevis. The big man came to a flat-footed halt, licked his lips, and growled an oath. Mike turned back to O'Doone. "Bill, you're a little out of line on that talk."

O'Doone showed his teeth in a grin, but his eyes were narrowed and wicked. "Bill O'Doone ain't out of line, friend. If Jenny wasn't a little crazy about you, I'd let this wood hauling go, and see you smash, but it's a chance for you to make some money, and you're gonna have money before I'll let Jenny marry you."

"Before you let her?" Mike asked softly.

"That's what I said. Now about this wood. It's eight miles between here and town, and even with the loads going downhill, it'll take a lot of time to handle that many sticks."

I reckon it will," Mike agreed, and waited for O'Doone to go on.

The freighter swallowed, anger tightening the muscles of his face. "Well, damn it," he shouted, "you ain't said boo to me about it, and if I'm gonna haul this wood, I want to start."

"Be glad to have you to haul it," Mike quietly replied, "for one dollar a cord."

"One dollar a . . ." O'Doone swallowed. What kind of a damned joke are you trying to pull off?"

"No joke, Bill," Mike said coolly.

Squint Hogan laughed, a dry little chuckle that was a match flame lighting the tinder of O'Doone's temper.

"Go to hell," O'Doone snapped, and turned toward his buggy. "I came here to listen to a fair proposition, and you talk about a dollar a cord."

"A dollar a cord to deliver it to the houses in Gold Town," Mike said, "or we'll get it to Gold Town ourselves."

O'Doone wheeled around. "How are you gonna get it to Gold Town?"

"My business, friend. Are you taking my offer?"

"No. It's five dollars a cord whether I haul it from here to Gold Town, or move it fifty yards."

Mike came close to him then, and his voice was unnaturally soft. "Figger a little, Bill. I'm selling for ten dollars. Add your five and the two the Protective Association wants, and we'd be making the boys pay seventeen dollars a cord. It's too much."

"I thought you weren't going to pay Price Horn anything."

"I'm not, and I'm not paying you five dollars for hauling. It's time your freight monopoly and Horn's association were busted, and I'm the huckleberry aiming to do it."

"Try it," O'Doone said angrily. "Let's see you make that one wagon you own run fast enough between here and Gold Town to haul a thousand cords of wood."

"Bill, you're not a crook. I can't understand why you're tangled up with Price Horn."

"I ain't tangled up with Horn, but I'll tell you one thing," O'Doone said flatly, "I do all the hauling that's done in these parts. Savvy?"

Then Mike said slowly and deliberately, "I asked you why you were tangled up with

Horn, and you say you ain't. That leaves just one thing for me to think. O'Doone, you're both a liar and a crook."

O'Doone wheeled, and drove at Mike, fists lashing out in a wicked fury.

CHAPTER TWO

Satan Sets the Type

MIKE absorbed a hard driven right to his face, another to his neck, and then smashed a fist through O'Doone's guard, feeling the man's nose squash under his knuckles. O'Doone's head snapped back, and for a moment his hands dropped. Again Mike hit him. This time O'Doone went flat on his back. Instinctively his hand dropped to gun butt.

"Hold it, you sneaking son of Satan." Squint Hogan grabbed an axe and held it over O'Doone's head. "Mike don't pack a gun. You pull that trigger and I'll cut off your hand."

O'Doone got to his feet then, blood dribbling from his nose. He moved in more cautiously this time, right fist flicking in swift, rapier-like blows that cut a shallow gash on Mike's cheek bone, and brought blood from the corner of his mouth.

"Do him in, Mike," Mush Trevis belted.

Mike retreated before O'Doone, waiting until the opening was right, pretending to be out of breath and nearly spent, and O'Doone began crowding him. Mike reeled, and partly fell, and O'Doone was on him. He swung long, wild blows, trying for a knockout, until Mike, suddenly reversing his tactics, stepped inside O'Doone's swing and brought a savage, turning fist squarely to the point of the freighter's jaw. O'Doone's knees gave under him, and he crashed to the ground.

Squint Hogan prodded O'Doone in the ribs with a toe, but there was no sign of consciousness. "Took you a hell of a long time," Hogan grumbled. He filled a can in the creek, and sloshed the water over O'Doone's face.

It was several minutes before O'Doone was on his feet. He stood for a time beside the buggy, a hand on the front wheel. Rubbing the back of his hand across his nose, he glanced at the blood, and then turned to Mike. He said, "You finished yourself

today, Malone. You'll never get this wood to Gold Town, and you'll never marry Jenny."

"I've got a notion you'll be hauling my wood at a dollar a cord, O'Doone, and next time you see Horn, tell him I don't want his protection."

O'Doone made no answer. He climbed into the buggy, unwrapped the lines, and drove off. When he was gone Mike's men looked at him questioningly. He grinned a little. "All right, boys. We'll get this wood to Gold Town, but we'll have a hell of a time delivering it if O'Doone stays stubborn."

"Looks to me like you went out of your way to pass that tough talk on to Price Horn," Parson Flint growled. "We'll hear from him soon enough."

"He'll hear from me first. The way to fight Horn is to start the fight first and keep it coming." He paused, eyeing them from big Mush Trevis to melancholy Parson Flint. "We came here to mine gold, and we're cutting wood instead, because Horn's men jumped our claims. That's why I say if we don't make a nickel out of this wood, but break Horn loose from the hold he's got on things, it's a good job."

"That's right," Squint Hogan agreed, "only I'd like to break O'Doone to boot."

"O'Doone won't be hard to bust when we get Horn," Mike said.

"You're soft because you're in love with Jenny," Hogan growled.

"Might be." Mike grinned, and wiped a hand across his battered face. "I know a little more about Bill than you boys do. I tell you that after we whittle Horn down, Bill O'Doone's going to be a different man. Now mebbe we ought to go to work."

They worked steadily until noon; the forest silence broken only by the hollow thud of axe against pine, the steady song of the saw, and the periodic earth-shaking crash of giant pine trees against the earth. Not until Long Nose George banged a heavy spoon against a dish pan, and yelled, "Come and get it, you sawdust-eaters," did they drop axe and saw, and move toward the shack.

A sullen overcast spread slowly across the sky, and the clouds over Bull Mountain darkened with the promise of a violent storm. Mike pointed upward, and remarked grimly, "Gonna be rainin' in an hour."

"And with fifty more cords still to cut," Mush Trevis grumbled, as he sat down at the table.

Before they had finished eating, lightning thrusts had split apart the somber sky, and thunder rattled the windows of the shack.

"Sounds like Gettysburg," Squint Hogan observed sourly. "Damn it, why couldn't it hold off another week?"

"It's what I've been looking for," Mike said.

Parson Flint reached to the stove for the coffee pot. "I've been kind o' curious about one thing, Mike. How are we gonna get our wood hauled after you beat hell out of O'Doone and offered him one dollar a cord?"

Mike grinned as he pulled his pipe from his pocket and began to fill it. "Crazy, ain't I, Parson? All right. Here it is. I figger we'll let Camp Creek float the wood to Gold Town."

They stared at him in silence a moment, surprised and not understanding what he meant. Then Parson said doubtfully, "You're joshing us, ain't you?"

"No," Mike shook his head. "I was gambling on the weather when I offered O'Doone a dollar to haul. My idea is to let the creek float the wood down to Gold Town, but we'll have to get O'Doone to deliver the wood from the ten acres I bought below Brown's place."

"You'd better talk a little more," Trevis said sharply. "How's a little piddling stream like that gonna float a thousand cords of wood eight miles?"

"The Indians tell me that almost every spring a storm brings most of the snow down off Bull Mountain, and makes Camp Creek a hell of a big stream. About four years out of five they said, and I claim that's purty good odds."

They grinned then, the tension gone, and Parson said, "You're smarter'n we are, Mike. I've looked at that stinking little dribble all winter, and never thought about using it."

"Mebbe there's one thing you didn't figger on," Trevis said a little stubbornly. "What's gonna keep Camp Creek from taking our wood on past Gold Town into the John Day and having it wind up in the Columbia?"

"We'll fell that big pine I've got on my

ten acres, which will pile the wood up. Besides, the banks widen so we won't have much current to buck. The only trouble is we'll be wetter'n a bunch of muskrats for a few days getting the wood out of the creek and corded up again."

"We can stand it," Trevis said.

Mike got up, and opening his trunk, took out his gun belt. "The minute Horn sees what we're up to, we'll have a fight. I'm hoping O'Doone will stay out."

"Horn won't bother us till we get our wood down there," Parson said. "What's that gun for?"

"I'm gonna bother Horn," Mike said, and putting on his slicker, left the shack.

BEFORE Mike had ridden a mile from the wood camp, occasional large drops of rain splashed the dust in the trail ahead of him. By the time he reached Gold Town it was raining steadily. Mike pulled into the crooked, narrow main street that ran along the east side of the creek, and reined up in front of the newspaper office. The editor was a small, bald man who glanced up as Mike came in, but gave him no greeting. Mike came to his desk, and said, "Howdy, Smith."

"Howdy, Malone," Smith said sourly, pulling his eye shade a little lower. He continued writing.

Anger began to grow in Mike. He had never liked the man, suspecting he was Price Horn's tool, and now he liked him less. He said sharply, "Funny ideas a man gets, ain't it, Smith?"

"Yeah. Very funny." Smith did not look up.

"Like my ideas about newspaper editors. I always thought they were out in front kicking up a dust about justice and human rights and liberty. Hell, Smith, you never wrote a line about Price Horn and the way he's gouging every miner within ten miles of Gold Town."

Casually Smith laid down his pen, opened a drawer, grabbed a Colt, and brought it up fast, but not fast enough. Mike leaned over the desk, a big hand closing over the editor's wrist and twisting it before the gun was leveled.

Mike shook Smith's wrist until the gun clattered to the floor. He grabbed a handful of the editor's shirt and brought him out of his chair. "I oughta gun whip you for

a trick like that." His eyes flashed danger.

Smith let out a scared squeal that gave way to a grunt as Mike pushed him back into the chair. Mike moved around the desk, kicked the gun the length of the room, and said, "Now, mister, pick up that pen and take this down."

Smith obediently dipped the pen and reached for a sheet of paper.

"Gold Town's wood supply will be moved into Gold Town within a few days," Mike dictated. "The price will be ten dollars a cord, and no more because we are not paying Price Horn his usual tribute and we're not paying Bill O'Doone his usual hauling rates. The miners on Camp Creek could have all costs down fifty per cent if they had the courage to fight. Signed, Mike Malone."

When Smith finished writing it, he raised his bleak eyes to Mike. "You want me to print that?"

"You bet I do."

"I . . . I can't, Malone." The editor ran an ink-splattered hand over his face. "You haven't been around town long. You don't know how Horn works."

"I know what I'll do if you don't," Mike said grimly.

"He'll kill me. So help me, Malone, he'd kill me before I could get the papers in the mail."

"All right." Mike moved toward the door. "You can figure out whether you'd rather have me or Horn kill you, Smith. Looks like you're gonna die either way."

Mike went out, leaving the editor pale-faced and scared, his hand trembling as he motioned for Mike to come back. He said, "Wait a minute, Malone," and got to his feet. When Mike came back into the shop, Smith went on, "I'm not a fighting man, Malone. Don't claim to be, but maybe you are. Now what kind of protection are you going to give me if I print this?"

"None, mister. You'll have the same amount of protection I've got for myself and four wood cutters."

Smith swallowed. "But if I run this, and Horn sees it without knowing why it's there, he'll be so mad he'll kill me before he finds out I had to run it."

"Then I'll tell him." Mike's grin was a quick stretching of his lips that held no mercy for Smith. "If you make a mistake and forget to put that in, I'll be back."

Mike stepped out of the newspaper office into the rain. Loosening the middle button of his slicker, he shoved one hand inside, and, with fingers curled around gun butt, turned toward Price Horn's office.

CHAPTER THREE

Swift Water to Gold Town

THE office of the Gold Town Protective Association was a block downstream from the newspaper office, a small, white building set close to the footpath that paralleled the street. It was the only painted building in town. The windows were clean, and one of them held the gold-lettered words, OFFICE OF PRICE HORN, MAYOR OF GOLD TOWN.

The rain had turned the dust to mud that squished underfoot as Mike followed the path to Horn's office. He opened the door, and stepped inside. Horn was working at a desk in the back of the room. He was a pudgy man still under forty with a shrewd, ruthless mind. He scooted back his chair, and dropped both hands to his lap so that they were out of sight. As Mike entered, Horn greeted him courteously: "Howdy, Malone."

Horn was a fastidious dresser, and everything about his office was well-kept and clean. Mike pushed back his hat to an angle that was an unspoken challenge, and deliberately kicked the mud from his boots.

"Horn, you know I've got wood that I'm selling in Gold Town," Mike said without preface. "By nature I'm a stubborn cuss who believes in a free country, and I'm wondering why you as mayor haven't done something about making it free around here."

Horn's round-cheeked face showed puzzlement. "It's free."

"That means you won't touch me when I start delivering wood in Gold Town?"

"Of course I won't touch you," Horn said smoothly. "On the other hand, I cannot assure you protection against the toughs."

"I ain't paying the two dollars a cord your bully boy Bellew told me to pay. What are you gonna do?"

Horn shrugged, the soft smile masking his feelings. "I won't do a thing, Malone. I just won't guarantee you protection."

"Then you're promising trouble, Horn, and I aim to make trouble first."

Mike dived across the desk at Horn. The two men fell backwards to the floor, the chair smashing under them. Horn's hands reached for his holsters, but Mike's action had been fast and unexpected, and Horn had the guns only half-lifted when he went over. They fell out of his hands, and he had no time to hunt for them. Mike's fists beat a steady tattoo on his fat face. Horn struck back as they rolled over, caught the lumberjack in the groin with his knee. A spasm of pain washed through Mike, but he grabbed Horn by the neck, pounded his head against the floor and pressed his thumbs tightly against the fat man's windpipe. Horn's grip on Mike relaxed, his body slumped, and when Mike rose, Horn lay motionless.

Mike found an axe in the woodshed behind the building, and returning to the office, smashed apart the desk, the rest of the chairs in the room, and the bookcase set against the back wall. Horn regained consciousness before Mike finished. He raised himself to a sitting position against the wall, and sat there, face gray and filled with more hatred than Mike had ever seen.

Mike tossed the axe through the back door, and slid a hand into his slicker so that it again gripped the gun butt. "Mebbe you get the idea of what will happen to you if you try anything when we bring our wood into town."

Horn said nothing, but the expression in his eyes was unmistakable.

At the door Mike said, "One more thing, Horn. Smith's running a little piece I gave him. You won't like it. Don't jump him about it, or I'll be back."

Outside, no one was in sight. Mike saw that in a quick glance as he turned toward his horse, and he wondered why none of Horn's men were around. The rain would keep the townspeople indoors, but it wouldn't account for the absence of the protective association's thugs. A faint prickle of uneasiness ran along Mike's spine. Again he looked behind him, saw no one, and moved on toward his horse.

It was that prickle of uneasiness which saved Mike's life. He was tensely expectant, right hand still inside his slicker, gun pulled from holster, when he heard a man behind him say, "Malone." Mike wheeled and

went sideways as his gun came clear. The man fired in that same instant, the bullet whipping through the slicker and drawing blood along Mike's ribs. Then Mike fired, his first bullet driving the man to his knees, the second bringing him full out on the ground, face cheek-down against the mud.

The townsmen came tumbling out of their stores and shops, stood around Mike in the rain and asked what had caused the fight. Horn was there, and the editor, Smith, and a dozen more, and Mike, looking them over, could not identify any of them as Horn's men.

When Mike told them what had happened, Horn said sourly, "Looks like murder to me, Malone."

Mike laughed. "What does it look like to the rest of you gents?"

"I saw it through the window," the storekeeper said. "It wasn't murder, Horn. This fellow Malone killed is one of your association boys, and he got exactly what he had coming. He had a gun in his hand."

Most of them nodded their agreement. One man picked up the gun from the mud, looked at it, and handed it to Horn. "One empty shell, Horn."

"And he fired that shell before Malone pulled trigger," the storekeeper said.

"You'll have to put a better man on my tail, Horn," Mike taunted.

Horn shrugged and kept his silence, hiding his feelings behind a mask.

Mike moved back to his horse and mounted. He said bluntly, "It was attempted murder, and I don't reckon you're fooling these boys any more than you are me."

As Mike rode away he wondered what Price Horn's next move would be. A man in Horn's position could not stand for opposition. It had to be all, or nothing. Sooner or later, if the mining town survived, the accumulated hatred of those he preyed upon would break into explosive action. Mike could not tell whether that moment had come to Gold Town yet or not, but the townsmen had not feared Horn enough to call the shooting of the association man murder. It might be a straw in the wind.

THE creek was a foot higher when Mike got back to camp. "A warm rain like this will bring the snow off Bull Mountain a whooping," he said.

Mush Trevis laughed mightily, and opined, "Bill O'Doone is gonna give Ma Nature a real cussing when he sees our wood coming without wheels under it."

"Mush, you and me will drive the wagon down," Mike said, "and get that pine across the creek. The rest of you stay here, and heave the wood in. You'd better take turns staying up tonight so you can keep an eye on the creek. Start heaving soon as it's bankfull."

Parson Flint looked at Mike closely. "You haven't said what you done in town, but I noticed a bullet hole in your slicker and a show of blood on your shirt. How about it?"

"I had a little fracas with one of Horn's men," Mike said carelessly. "You boys better keep your artillery handy. It might pay dividends."

The rain had stopped before Mike and Mush Trevis reached Gold Town. The ten acres Mike had bought to use as a wood yard were below the town, and as they passed the building that housed Horn's office, Mike saw men working inside. Price Horn, Mike thought grimly, would never forgive him for what had happened that morning.

There were a number of trees on Mike's ten acres, but only one stood close enough to the creek to serve Mike's purpose. It was a giant pine with the sprawling limbs that it would take to dam the logs when they reached this place. When the tree came down, in a great spray of water, Mike sleeved sweat from his forehead, and grinned at Trevis.

"It'll do, Mush. I don't know just how fast the creek will rise, but I'm guessing we won't see our first stick until tomorrow, mebbe around noon. We'll have to work some of 'em around, but it won't be long until we'll have a jam across here that'll hold."

"Gonna rain some more." Trevis looked up at the sullen sky. "Hell of a night to be sleeping out."

"O'Doone's coming down the creek," Mike said. "Don't jump him, Mush."

"I didn't think that Jasper would show up around us for awhile," Trevis growled.

But if Bill O'Doone held any resentment for the licking Mike had given him, he kept it carefully concealed behind a mask of friendliness. He greeted them when he

came up, looked at the wagon, then at the pine that lay across the creek, and finally at Mike. "You boys moved your camp down here?"

"For a while," Mike said.

It had been Mike's intention to say nothing of their plans until the wood had reached Gold Town, but Trevis couldn't resist the temptation to taunt O'Doone. He said, "Bill, if you had the sense of a boiled owl, you'd know what we was down here for, and what that pine's doing across the creek."

"I ain't real bright," O'Doone said. "Just why are you down here?"

"Shut up, Mush," Mike grated.

"Hell, he might as well know it," Trevis said. "We're floating our wood down the creek, which same cheats you out of a big hauling job."

Mike, watching O'Doone, couldn't tell how much the man was surprised. The freighter laughed loudly, slapped Trevis on the back, and said, "You sure did cheat me. Whoever thought that up was working his brain awful hard. Wasn't you, was it, Mush?"

"Me?" Trevis asked in surprise. "I never had a good idea in my life." He looked sharply at O'Doone. "Ain't you mad?"

O'Doone laughed loudly again. "Why should I be mad? You used your heads, and I never begrudge a man for out-thinking me." He nodded at Mike. "My offer to deliver your wood for five dollars still holds."

"One dollar," Mike snapped. "Most of it goes right here in town, and none of it more'n a mile or so down the creek. We'll help your boys load, Bill. We can handle a lot of wood in a few days that way."

O'Doone's eyes were slitted and frosty. "Five dollars, bucko. You try hauling a thousand cords of wood with that wagon and team, and you'll be here till hell cools off."

"One dollar," Mike said stubbornly.

O'Doone shrugged. "You're a good man with your fists, and for thinking up smart tricks like this, but when it comes to knowing where your bread's buttered, you're plumb slow between the ears."

"One dollar," Mike repeated.

O'Doone grinned pleasantly. "Keeping on saying it don't change my mind. I can

afford to wait longer than you boys." He looked at Mush Trevis, and asked, "Where you boys gonna sleep tonight?"

"On the ground," Trevis said, and swore bitterly. "My rheumatism will be so bad I won't be able to swing an axe come morning."

"I'll tell you," O'Doone said carelessly. "We ain't seeing this thing just the same way, but there ain't no reason why we can't be friends. I've got a shack with a cook stove back of my barn. No beds in it, but it's tight and dry. Why don't you boys roll your blankets up there? You can put your team in the barn."

"That's mighty kind of you," Trevis said. "I reckon we'll just take him up on that, won't we, Mike?"

It wasn't right, but at the moment Mike couldn't see what O'Doone had in mind. He nodded, giving the freighter a cool stare, and asked, "You wouldn't be trying to get us into a handy position so you can ambush us, would you, Bill?"

Anger welled up in O'Doone again, but he held it back. "I've got reason to put a bullet into your guts, but with Jenny feeling about you like she does, I'll have to hold that slug for a spell."

"All right, Bill," Mike said. "We'll move in right away."

"You had a purty close call today," O'Doone said. "Most of Horn's men were down at the lower camp, or you'd never have got away with smashing up Horn's place. He's purty mad, Horn is."

"I ain't surprised," Mike said.

That night after they'd rolled up on the floor of O'Doone's shack, Mike still couldn't see what sort of scheme O'Doone had in mind, but he was convinced that the freighter was up to something. He lay awake thinking about it, and it seemed to him he'd barely dropped off to sleep when an earth-quivering explosion brought him back to consciousness.

"What's that?" Mush Trevis demanded sharply.

Mike had a guess, and he cursed himself for not thinking of it before it was too late. He lighted a lantern, buckled his gun belt around him, and reached for his hat. He said, "Come on, and let's see what's left of our pine tree. If I ain't mistaken, it's blasted to hell and floating down the creek by now."

CHAPTER FOUR

Lead for a Logger's Rights

THE first gray light of dawn was breaking across the earth when Mike and Trevis came to the creek. Mike's guess had been right. The middle of the big pine where the heaviest flow of current washed against it had been splintered by an explosion. Mike walked out on the lower trunk, swinging his lantern close to the water, and when he came back, he felt sick. Within a few hours the first sticks of wood would be here, and the flooded creek would take them past Gold Town and on to the John Day.

"What does it look like?" Trevis demanded.

"Ten million splinters."

"Enough left to hold any wood back?"

"Yeah, till it gets a little weight against it."

"What are we gonna do now?" Trevis demanded. "Stand here and see our winter's work float past?"

"No, by hell," Mike said hotly. "There's other pine trees along this creek. Let's get one down."

"But none of these on your land . . ."

"We don't care whose land it is. There's one about fifty feet below here that'll do the job."

"You'll have us in jail for sure," Trevis growled.

"There's no law around here to put us into jail but Price Horn's law, and if Horn's law allows his men to blast our tree it oughta let us cut down somebody else's."

"Whose land is this?"

Mike laughed. "It's Bill O'Doone's."

It was full daylight before Bill O'Doone came down to the creek. When he saw the tree that Mike and Trevis were felling, he bellowed an oath. "Where in hell do you think you are? Have I got to build a fence around my land?"

Mike straightened, cast an anxious glance up the creek, but didn't see any wood. "It'd take more'n a fence to keep me off when we need a tree as bad as we need this one. Purty cute, Bill, offering us a nice, dry place to sleep so Horn's boys could work without being bothered."

"Get off of my land, Malone," O'Doone

said menacingly. "I didn't try stopping you from floating your wood down, and I took the licking you gave me without getting a bunch of my teamsters and filling you full of buckshot, but I ain't gonna stand here and let you cut my trees down."

"And I ain't standing here and watching a thousand cords of wood float by," Mike snapped. "All right, Mush. Start pulling on that saw."

O'Doone said nothing more, and Mike, glancing up at him, saw the triumphant grin that curled his lips. That wasn't right, either, Mike thought, for in another fifteen minutes the tree would be down. He said, "Hold it, Mush," and stepping away from the tree, reached for his gun.

"Don't do it, Malone."

It was Jake Bellew, Horn's top trigger man who carried a star and claimed to be Gold Town's marshal. He was standing beside O'Doone, a gun in his hand. Behind him were two more of Horn's men, both holding naked Colts.

"You see how it is, Malone," O'Doone said with quiet malice. "You can't just jump another man's land and steal his timber. You're in real trouble, friend."

Bill O'Doone was putting it mildly. Bellew was a squat man with a livid scar along his right cheek that gave his eye an odd twist and pulled his mouth downward so that the right side of his face appeared to be constantly scowling. He was perfect for the job he held, a thoroughly evil man who was good with either gun or knife, and Mike, looking at him now, knew that nothing less than a miracle would keep him from dying within the hour.

"I'm being arrested, I take it," Mike said, "for cutting down O'Doone's tree?"

"We don't care nothing about trees," Bellew growled, "but we do care about gents who think they're tough, and try doing business in Gold Town without fixing things up with the Protective Association. We're arresting you for busting up Horn's office."

Mush Trevis had stepped around the tree to stand beside Mike. He had a gun, and if he'd come around the pine with his Colt talking, Mike would have had a chance for his own, but Trevis never thought that way. He stared at the four men in front of him, and said, "Let's beat hell out of 'em, Mike."

Bellew laughed. "Try it, Trevis. If you're smart, you'll pull your freight, and keep going. All right, Malone. Head toward town."

"Now look, Bellew, this ain't . . ." O'Doone began.

"Shut up," Bellew snarled. "You take orders from Horn same as me. Get moving, Malone. Better get their guns, Roby."

A slim man behind Bellew stepped toward Mike, and as he came between O'Doone and Mike, O'Doone brought a shoulder against him in a quick, savage thrust that spilled him into Bellew and sent them both sprawling. The other man behind O'Doone fired point blank at the freighter, and O'Doone went down. Mike, plucking gun, drove a slug into the brain of the man who had shot O'Doone.

Bellew had rolled on over and, coming up on hands and knees, fired once at Mike. He missed, and again it was O'Doone who saved Mike's life. He reached for Bellew, grabbed an ankle and pulled just as the association man squeezed trigger. There was the breath of the slug along Mike's face, but then he lined his sights on Bellew and laced a bullet into his chest.

The slim man named Roby had dropped his Colt when he'd gone down, and Trevis shot him through the shoulder just as he laid his hand on it and started to lift it from the ground. Roby fell on his face, and lay still.

O'Doone was shot through the back, the bullet angling downward and to the side, and Mike, looking at him, saw that he was not as badly hurt as he had thought from the way the freighter had gone down.

"The doc will be along in a minute," O'Doone said. "He always comes when he hears shooting. You go get Horn. I'm all right. Go on. Git."

"Watch Bill," Mike told Trevis, and started running up the road toward town, his gun in his hand.

BEFORE he'd gone fifty feet, he met a string of miners that had streamed out of town to see what the shooting was about. The medico was with them, and Mike pushed him on toward O'Doone.

"I'm going after Horn," Mike said in answer to their questions. "Bellew's dead. So's another man, and Roby's got a slug in his shoulder. I'm gonna finish this now

that I've got it started." He eyed the men. "Hell, we'll help you," a dozen miners shouted.

They swarmed back up the street, Mike in front, and spilled into Price Horn's office. Some of the damage Mike had done had been repaired, but not all. Horn, seeing them coming, grabbed up a shotgun, and motioned to the three men with him to pull their guns. But other miners boiled in through the back door, grabbed Horn before he could fire, and pulled him down.

"Hang him," a miner howled. "Damn him, he's lived off us for more'n a year, and I've stood it all I'm going to."

It had come, the explosive action that Mike had been certain would come sooner or later.

"You feel plumb proddy now, don't you?" Mike demanded. "With Bellew out of things, you're hell bent for a hemp party." They looked at him, and shame overcame them. Mike, grinning sourly, continued, "You needed some prodding, didn't you, to start doing a job you should have done before I hit this camp. Now if you ain't too proddy, mebbe you'll listen to what I've got to say."

"Sure, Malone," one of them said. "We'll listen."

"It's time we set up a government that's different than what Horn rammed down our throats. I say to lock these men up in the jail Horn had us build, and we'll meet here tonight. We'll elect our officers and we'll try Horn and his gang. Then we'll hang 'em."

"Yeah," a miner said. "I guess that's right."

It was late that evening when Mike

came into O'Doone's house, and when Jenny answered his knock, he kissed her without getting slapped. "We're getting hitched," Mike said, "soon as me and the boys get that wood out of the creek. Right now it looks like a mountain." He kissed her again, and asked, "Any objections?"

"Not any," she said. "Come in. Bill wants to see you."

O'Doone was in bed, his face paler than Mike had ever seen it. He winked at Mike, said, "You're a fresh Irish punk, and I hope you and Jenny have ten more." He sobered then, and asked, "what happened?"

"Everything's in order," Mike said, "and we'll try Horn and his bunch tomorrow. Roby will talk, and I don't reckon we'll lack any evidence."

"I've sure done some thinking since you gave me that licking," O'Doone said. "You called me a liar and a crook, and you were right. I'd just gone along with Horn because I knew I had a good thing, and if these fools were willing to pay, I didn't have any sympathy for 'em. Then when Bellew showed up, aiming to kill you, and told me I was taking orders same as him, well, I kind of blowed up inside."

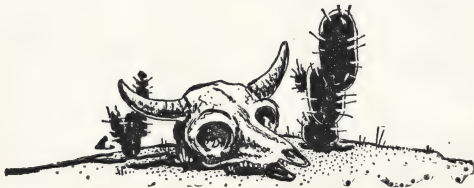
"You saved my hide," Mike said, "and I'm thanking you."

"I told Mike you'd never break away from Horn short of an earthquake," Jenny said. "I guess we've had it."

"It was an earthquake when he hit me," O'Doone said. Then he grinned, and added, "One of these days I'm gonna even up on that licking. Got any objections, Mike?"

"MMMMM," Mike answered, which might have meant anything. At the moment he was too busy to make his answer clear.

THE END



Trail of Talking Dead Men



Johnny bleated as the bullet slammed into his pack.

JOHNNY KING walked the dreary road to Coloma, and the friendless hills rose on each side. Even the brush siding the red dust of the trail looked sere and unfriendly. Not that it mattered much; Johnny wasn't used to friendliness.

He tramped along with the boots he's purchased in San Francisco hurting his feet, and the frying pan and bacon and beans he'd bought for a pretty penny in Sacramento weighing down the clumsy blanket pack on his shoulders.

The heat of a Spring sun made him sweat. He felt like turning back to Captain Sutter's fort and taking the job in the counting-house he'd been offered, and then he braced his shoulders and plodded on. There'd be no turning back this time. He burned his last bridge behind when he sold his meager possessions to buy steerage passage around the Horn to 'Frisco. He'd quit his job in Boston, and the blue-nosed

manager of *Cortland & Wiggins, Importers* had voiced an opinion he'd evidently been harboring for some time.

"Your work in the counting-house has never been exemplary," he'd said. "So—"

Johnny King had cut him short. "So that's why I'm going to California, where I hear they've discovered gold."

"You and a lot of other fools!"

"I guess I've got as good a chance as the next one," Johnny had said stoutly.

But by the time he reached San Francisco, and fought the wild-eyed crowds, and the mud-holes, and the rats, he wasn't so sure that Boston might not have been the place to stay. Nobody out here paid any attention to him. He was little, and narrow-

shouldered, and insignificant, and worst of all—he knew it.

Most of his money was gone by the time he paid his fare on the *Ilena* to Sacramento. He'd visited Captain Sutter's fort, and the graying captain, who could see his empire crumbling, had tried to hire him.

And Johnny King admitted to himself that he'd been tempted. Captain Sutter had made only one mistake. He'd offered wages higher than any counting house in Boston could afford. Johnny figured if Sutter could pay such prices for help there had to be more money for a man in the gold-fields.

His own resources were exhausted before he could buy a Colt for himself like other men wore, so he had to start gunless.

That was one of the things that made him stop like a statue when he heard the ugly crash of revolver fire echoing through the morning air. The shot came from around the bend in front of him, and he was still frozen in his tracks when a rider raced into view. It was a toss-up as to which was the more surprised at sight of the other. But the highwayman reacted first. Johnny King saw the man's revolver flash from its holster, and the wild thought came to him that he was going to die before ever reaching the gold-fields. The highwayman's eyes were covered with a black mask, but below it was a magnificent black brush of beard.

The bandit took aim, and Johnny King's muscles came unfrozen with a jerk. He dived like a frightened quail toward the sage and manzanita siding the Coloma road, and the gun roared behind him. The bullet struck the iron frying pan inside his blanket-pack and sent him off balance. He sprawled in the brush and bleated like a stricken animal.

The highwayman laughed, a booming, contemptuous sound in the morning, and through a roaring in his ears, Johnny King heard the man ride on along the road.

He lay there until he got his breath, and cold sweat was soaking his skin when he climbed to his feet. His knees were so shaky that he could hardly walk. Johnny King came to a bitter conclusion. He was a coward, for only a coward dies a thousand deaths before he is killed, and Johnny

Dead eyes stared up at green-horn Johnny King from the red dust of the Coloma Road, warning him back. But the blood of Back Bay, in far-off Boston, may run as red as that of the untamed frontier, and Johnny was just the kind of jigger to pick up that grisly challenge—though the Coloma Road proved only a short-cut to boothill!

figured that was a conservative estimate.

"Even if you'd had a gun," he told himself acidly, "you wouldn't have dared pull it on a big fellow like that."

Around the bend ahead, a horse nickered.

Johnny King stumbled forward. He was panting, and his pack was slipping off his shoulders when he rounded the bend. Ahead of him stood a tall palomino, reins caught in the hand of a crumpled man.

The man's shirt had been ripped open, and there were a few flakes of gold clinging to the wool. A poke or money-belt had been stolen by the bandit, King realized.

There was no use trying to follow the bandit. He had no gun, and he doubted if he could stay on the palomino if the animal got off the Coloma road.

He knew he should forget the dead man, and then he saw the little red book that had fallen from the other's hip pocket. Half covered by dust, he could still read the word "Diary" scrawled across the cover.

Johnny reached for it, and then hesitated, for some inner voice was warning him that if he looked inside he would read things that might change the whole course of his life. Again he studied the dead stranger. They were nearly the same age, he guessed. The man appeared to be about twenty-eight or thirty. He was medium-sized, with

blond hair, and a nice, clean-cut face that was serene now in death. His eyes seemed to invite Johnny King to inspect the diary.

And Johnny King accepted the invitation. Hunkered down there in the road he opened the book and looked at the dedication.

To Mary Davis,
My Wife-to-be
By Tom Cloud

"Damn men like that outlaw!" Johnny King said, and he remembered how the highwayman had laughed, like killing was a big joke.

Johnny noticed that his hands were trembling so much that he could hardly turn the pages, and again that inner voice cautioned him to walk on along the road to Coloma, but instead he grimly scanned the first entry, and a name jumped out at him.

I left Cortland & Wiggins today, and I have never been happier to make a change. A fine firm perhaps, but they suck the life blood from a man.

Tomorrow it will be hot for California and the gold fields. I would see you tonight, Mary, but I am afraid my courage might leave me if I held you in my arms again. This is my greatest adventure, and with luck you will be joining me inside a year. We can wait that long.

Johnny King blinked at the neatly penned words, and for one incredulous moment he thought that it was his own diary—only he'd never kept one. There was no friend or fiancée, or anybody else who would be interested in Johnny King's adventures. And suddenly, almost fiercely, he wished that there were.

He looked down at the calm face of the dead man. "Mebbe I'll finish out your story for you, Tom Cloud," he said.

THEY had worked for the same company, and that made them equal, particularly when they both felt the same way about leaving Cortland & Wiggins.

Johnny leafed through the small red book, reading entries from Boston to San Francisco, and he had to smile a little ruefully at some of Tom Cloud's remarks concerning San Francisco prices and habits.

The entries grew more scattered after Tom Cloud reached Sacramento and headed for Coloma. A tired man spent little time

on a diary at the end of the day, and then one glorious page caught Johnny's eye.

Eureka! I've struck it! Gold! Scads of it on a claim other miners had passed up as worthless. I found an ancient creek bed ten feet down, and it is paved with nuggets that will bring you to me. I start for Sacramento tomorrow to send passage money to you.

"And that money," Johnny King muttered aloud, "is what that highwayman got." Then he leafed another page, and realized with something akin to horror that he had guessed wrong, for the entries continued. They told of Tom Cloud reaching Sacramento without trouble, and sending money by Pacific Mail. The date on that entry was more than six months old.

"God!" Johnny King whispered. He calculated swiftly. "Why she could be reaching San Francisco most anytime now. Maybe that's why Tom Cloud was riding this way."

With the words blurring before his eyes, Johnny read of the dead man's return to Coloma, of his bitter fight through the wicked winter months to mine his claim.

And there was an end to the story of that battle in an entry dated just three days before. Johnny read:

A miner brought your letter to my claim. It was a great day in more ways than one. Of course, I'll meet the Princess Pat—and you.

I will bring good tidings for all my faith has been justified. Twenty feet down I reached bed-rock, and my clean-up netted us near fifteen thousand dollars, as it is weighed on the scales in Mr. Ike Trotter's Coloma store.

I am bringing the gold with me as it is not safe to try and hide it here. Besides I want to show you a good time in San Francisco—

Tom Cloud would not be showing Mary Davis a good time in San Francisco. All of his struggle, and all of his reward had vanished in one shot.

"Unless I take up where you left off," Johnny King said, and the diary trembled in his hands. Johnny King had no mirror handy, but if he could have seen his face he'd have been surprised. There were lines of determination graven deeply on his face. His lips were tighter than they'd ever been before, and there was a certain singing inside him that he couldn't explain.

Johnny stooped and closed Tom Cloud's eye-lids, and then with some difficulty he swung into the palomino's California saddle. Without even thinking about it he left his pack beside the dead man.

The gait of the big horse was pleasant, and he quickly accustomed himself to the high-pommeled saddle. It was somewhat different than the ones he'd ridden in Boston parks, and a whole lot more comfortable.

"Johnny King, you're a fool," he told himself, but that singing was still a new sensation inside his body, and he liked it.

His first chore was to report the murder and robbery to Sheriff Bert Scanlon. He found the Sacramento lawman, with a Havana cigar clamped between his teeth, seated in his office on Front Street. There were a number of men in the room as Johnny King hesitated on the threshold, and he heard a snatch of conversation.

"Scanlon," one of them was roaring, "we've got to curb the lawlessness in this town and on the road to Coloma. The gold-seekers are coming in a steady stream. They will swell into a flood before long because the word has gone all around the world that there is gold in California. Hire more deputies if you need them, but give the people protection!"

It was dim inside the room, after the brightness outside, and Johnny King blinked, thinking there was something familiar about that voice, and then his glance focussed on the man who had been doing the talking, and he guessed his heart was going to stop, but it didn't. The speaker wore a fine, black beard that fell to the middle button of his shirt, and Johnny King was certain he'd never forget it. He'd seen that beard out along the road to Coloma.

"COME IN," the sheriff invited, and he sounded a little pleased at this interruption.

Johnny blurted the truth before he had time to think. "There's a dead man on the Coloma road, a half dozen miles out of town, sir. He was robbed, and the gent who done it tried to kill me, but his bullet hit the frying pan in my pack."

The sheriff pulled on his cigar and sat up straight behind his desk. The other men in his office turned to stare at Johnny King.

"I don't see you wearin' no pack now," Scanlon said mildly.

"I left it out there," Johnny said, "and rode the dead man's horse into town."

"Most hosses," said the sheriff, "spook when a gun goes off."

"The man riding him kept hold of the reins," Johnny explained.

The bold-faced man laughed. "Sheriff, this sounds like a new one to me. This hombre met a man coming back from the gold-fields, and found out he was carrying a poke of gold so he shot him, took the dust, and rode in here to clear himself by telling you a cock-and-bull story about a highwayman doing the trick!"

The sheriff lumbered to his feet. He was a big man himself, with a heavy paunch, and plainly he didn't like to move around very much. "I guess we'll have to go and get the dead man," he grunted. "One of you gents run over to the undertanking parlor and tell Horwede to send out a wagon. And you—" he pointed his finger at Johnny King, "you come along with us."

"We're all going," the man with the black beard said, and his tone was menacing. "I can postpone my trip to San Francisco until the *Ilena* sails this afternoon. We've got to put a stop to these killings!"

The rest of the men in the room murmured a solid assent.

Johnny King's tongue was dry, and he guessed he should never have stopped here in the first place. A wise man would have kept right on to the quays along Front Street.

He heard a roar behind him as they stepped to the dirt walk in front of the sheriff's office. Newt Grower, the bearded man, cried, "That's Tom Cloud's palomino. I talked to him in Ike Trotter's Coloma store when he was having his clean-up weighed. He'd found a scad, and now he's dead. Gentlemen, this has got to stop. Every pickpocket, and alley-rat in San Francisco will be coming up here if it doesn't, and the value of our real estate will drop to nothing!"

"Be a shame," the sheriff said sourly. "Get yourselves mounted if you're going with us."

The men with Newt Grower made a run for the livery stable across the street, and Grower swung into the saddle of a big brown alongside Tom Cloud's palomino.

Johnny King thought numbly that it was the same horse the highwayman had ridden, but he couldn't be sure, and nobody would believe him even if he was sure. Newt Grower was obviously an important man in Sacramento.

He rode with the sheriff and the rest of them to the dry hills. Nobody else had been along the Coloma road, for Tom Cloud lay just as he'd left him. The buckboard from Horweed's rattled up.

"Don't tech him for a minute," the sheriff said, and his eyes were sharper than a lot of men might have realized. He looked down from his saddle at Tom Cloud's peaceful face.

"They's a hunk of loose paper layin' half under his arm," he said to the pair from the undertaking parlor. "Hand it up here."

Johnny King saw the word "Diary" printed across the top of the sheet, and the hills started to spin. He hadn't been going to mention the little red book. That had seemed to be something just between him and Tom Cloud and Mary Davis.

"Ain't no diary about him now," said one of the undertaker's men.

"I found it," Johnny King said hoarsely, and he knew his voice sounded desperate and guilty. He brought the small red book from his pocket, and tried to explain. "Cloud worked for the same firm as me back in Boston, and he's got his wife-to-be coming to California on the *Princess Pat*. I—I'm going to San Francisco to meet her. Figure maybe I can break the news to her easy."

Newt Grower chuckled. The sound was almost the same as the laughter Johnny King had heard that morning. "I'm on my way to 'Frisco this afternoon," he said. "I'll meet the lady, because you're going to jail, mister!"

"Jail?" Johnny croaked.

Sheriff Scanlon said mildly, "Why?"

"Because," Newt Grower exclaimed, "this man is the one who killed Cloud. Hell, his own talk convicts him. Cloud worked for the same outfit back East. This feller was likely jealous and he waited here and waylaid him as he came from Coloma. He's got Cloud's gold, and now he figures to get his girl. That diary on him is proof he's the thief, and if his pack layin' here ain't enough more to put in front of a Miners' Court, I'll eat my own hat!"

"That's a bullet hole through his blankets like he said." The sheriff pointed to the puncture in Johnny's pack.

Newt Grower chuckled. "He coulda put it there himself. And I'll lay you that he had his hands on Cloud's hoss before he ever started shootin'. Ain't no palomino in California goin' to stand still when a gun goes off."

"I told you Tom Cloud had hold of the reins," Johnny said.

"That's something you can tell the court," Grower said nastily. "Well, Sheriff," he added ominously, "you going to do your duty?" Scanlon nodded.

"You mean you're arresting me for murder?" Johnny said shrilly. It was still hard for him to believe that all this was happening to Johnny King, counting-house clerk. "Why—why I got to do down-river to meet Mary Davis. She—she won't know what's happened."

"I'll bear the bad tidings," Newt Grower said magnanimously.

They loaded Johnny's pack into the wagon with Tom Cloud, and the sheriff advised him not to try and make a getaway.

"I couldn't outride a turtle," Johnny King told him bitterly. "You've sure picked yourself some killer, sheriff!"

HE WAS alone, finally, in one of the small, airless cells behind the sheriff's office. There was a bunk in one corner and Johnny sat down on it, and held his head in his hands. He tried to think, but the effort was practically useless. All his thoughts would do was revolve about Mary Davis coming into San Francisco on the *Princess Pat* and being met by the man who had killed Tom Cloud.

"It ain't right," he muttered. But it wasn't right for him to be in jail either, and yet here he was, just as good as condemned, while Newt Grower strutted around town bragging that they'd caught a killer, practically red-handed.

Grower would be sailing on the *Ilena*, and Johnny King wondered what kind of a look he'd surprise on the man's face if he showed up on the same boat. Thinking along those lines made him remember something. Sheriff Scanlon had looked mighty sour after listening to Grower, and Johnny began to wonder just how well the lawman

liked the big real estate man if at all.

His step was almost jaunty as he walked to the door and rattled the bars. After awhile he heard the sheriff's heavy tread in the corridor. A key grated in the door, and Bert Scanlon stepped inside.

"Have a cigar, son," he said mildly.

Johnny King shook his head, and almost blushed. "They make me sick," he admitted. "Besides wouldn't you get in trouble smoking with a murderer?"

Sheriff Scanlon chuckled. His eyes were weary and wise through the smoke of his Havana. "You ain't no more a killer than me," he grunted. "I been waitin' for you to call. Figured you might guess where I stood."

Johnny felt his mouth drop open. He hadn't expected anything like this, and his heart started to hammer. "Then you know that Grower—"

"I don't know nothin', son," the sheriff cut in, "cept he buys a lot of land with gold from the camps and I ain't never seen him up diggin' any."

Johnny King drew a deep breath, and the singing was growing wilder and wilder inside him. "Maybe," he said, "I could be aboard the *Ilena* this afternoon."

"It might surprise Mr. Grower," the sheriff admitted. "Might get me in a pot of hot water too. Nope, you won't be aboard the *Ilena*, but they's a sloop loaded with vegetables that a friend of mine is sendin' down to 'Frisco in the mornin', and you could be aboard it. Might be we can even round up a Colt—if you figure you can use it in 'Frisco."

Johnny King's lips twisted, and he was seeing the crumpled, shape of a man on the road to Coloma. "Give me the chance," he said softly.

* * *

Some of the squash in the sloop weighed fifty pounds, and brown onions were the size of a man's head. "Everything she grow beeg in California," the Mexican at the tiller said, grinning.

Johnny King sat on a sack of potatoes that at San Francisco prices would bring almost its weight in gold, and he stared at the black bottomlands flowing past on either side of the river.

"There is the future," he said half to himself, and he knew in this single instant that he would never again find himself

riding the long road leading to Coloma.

The sheriff had brought him down to the slip where the sloop lay at anchor before dawn. "I ain't the only man in Sacramento who has suspected Grower," he'd said, "but dead men don't tell no tales. You're the fust one who has ever come back, and I guess you was so skeered you musta looked dead."

Johnny grinned. "I was!"

The sheriff nodded. "That's why he was so all-fired anxious to get you behind bars." He handed Johnny King a sealed envelope. "Give this to Sheriff Mahoney when you hit 'Frisco, and he'll lend ye a hand at keepin' an eye on Grower. Newt took a powerful heavy satchel with him when he boarded the *Ilena*, and I'd give a heap to know what was inside it."

"Tom Cloud's gold," Johnny's mouth had twisted again. "Enough to show Mary Davis a good time!"

But there was more to it than that. Johnny King had plenty of time to think as two days passed, and the sloop moved leisurely down the river and out into the bright bay. If Newt Grower could return to Sacramento with a Boston bride on his arm, he'd be a hard man to touch. A wife, and maybe a big house, would lend him respectability, and the sheriff had mentioned that Grower was planning to run for mayor at the next election.

Johnny tried to make his own clothes look a little better, but there wasn't much he could do to a wrinkled blue shirt, and a pair of baggy wool pants. He borrowed the captain's razor, though, and shaved as the little sloop danced. Afterwards, he hefted the revolver at his hip. He'd grown accustomed to the feel of it on this trip, and somewhere he'd heard the old adage that a gun makes all men equal.

Then he remembered the sheriff's last remarks. "You be sure and get hold of Mahoney. I don't want you tryin' to jump Grower single-handed. I'm figuring he'll know the fats in the fire the minute he lays eyes on you, and give hisself away by trying to shoot. That's why I want you to have Mahoney handy. He's paid to stop lead. You ain't."

"Senor Keeng, Senor Keeng," the Mexican helmsman's voice came into the sloop's tiny cabin, "come quickly if you weesh to see the sight. The *Princess Pat*, she is

dropping anchor, and her sails are like the great white butterflies—"

Johnny heard the helmsman through a sudden roaring in his head. He wondered if he would know the girl when he saw her, and he tried to picture what she might be like, but his mind was a sudden blank. All he could see was the face of Tom Cloud pillowed in the red dust of the Coloma road.

STEAMER day, and already the long lines of eager Argonauts were gathering in front of the post office on Telegraph Hill, waiting newspapers and mail from home. There were crowds swirling along the Embarcadero, and out on the pier where the longboats were starting in unload passengers.

Johnny King fought his way to the wharf, and it was a hard thing for a little man to do, but he didn't feel insignificant any longer.

He searched the throng for a big, black-bearded man, and saw no sign of Newt Grower. There was no sign either of San Francisco's sheriff, and he'd had no time to run up to Portsmouth Square, and the lawman's office.

He fought his way along the wharf, and he wondered again if he would recognize Mary Davis, and then his eyes touched a small cutter coming into the landing stage. Newt Grower had gone out to the *Princess Pat* personally to pick up the girl. Their boatman brought the cutter in smartly, and Grower handed a small woman in a bright dress to the landing stage. He followed her, and took her arm gallantly, and Johnny King elbowed through the crowd.

He was panting, and his roan hair was disheveled, but he looked neither small nor insignificant as he waited at the head of the stairs that came up from the landing stage.

Mary Davis came into view, and Johnny King just guessed that he'd have known her anywhere. She was small and nice-looking. Not pretty exactly, but if a man was in love with her he'd think her the finest of them all.

Right now her eyes were shining with tears that needed shedding. Her nose was red, and she acted a little dazed, but she kept her head up bravely, and Johnny King knew instinctively that she was another one

who had burned all her bridges behind her. There'd be no turning back for Mary Davis. She'd come to California to stay, and maybe, Johnny King thought, she'd ride back to Sacramento with him.

Newt Grower rose into view behind the girl, and Johnny saw his round, black eyes widen incredulously. "King," he whispered.

Johnny's left hand came out of his hip pocket, and there was a small red book in it. "You should have stolen this along with Tom Cloud's gold, Newt Grower, and then maybe we wouldn't be meeting each other here."

"Tom's diary!" the girl cried, and she jumped straight toward Johnny, and he knew it had been a mistake to show the book. He'd figured it might disconcert Grower, but instead he'd only succeeded in drawing the girl into a line between them.

He saw Newt Grower's shoulder hump, and he knew the man was drawing a gun from beneath his black coat. Instinct made him throw the diary over Mary Davis's head. He saw its fluttering pages catch Grower in the face, and then he swept the girl to one side with his free left arm. She stumbled and cried out, and her voice was drowned by the cough of Newt's gun.

Johnny King felt lead strike him. It scraped along his ribs, and left his side all numb. He forgot that he had ever called himself a coward. He'd been afraid of fear itself. Afraid to die and afraid to live. And now he felt free. He lifted the Colt the sheriff had given him, and he aimed for Newt Grower's black beard, and he saw the whisksers quiver with the impact of his bullet.

The highwayman took a step toward him, and his black eyes were misting. His mouth opened, and he pitched forward toward the dock.

Johnny King sat on a stack of empty potato sacks, and his eyes were on the companionway that led to the sloop's small cabin. The Mexican at the tiller grinned. If he was any judge of things there'd be some fine doings on deck when the senorita returned. There was nothing to fire a heart with romance like that high, white moon shining down on the waters of the Sacramento. It was enough to make any man and woman forget the past, and plan ahead.

Vultures of the Vallencito

Only the silently wheeling vultures and the stark skeletons of gold-seekers knew what became of the accursed treasure of Vallencito Valley—and the dying stranger who buried it!

By Roy Vandergoot

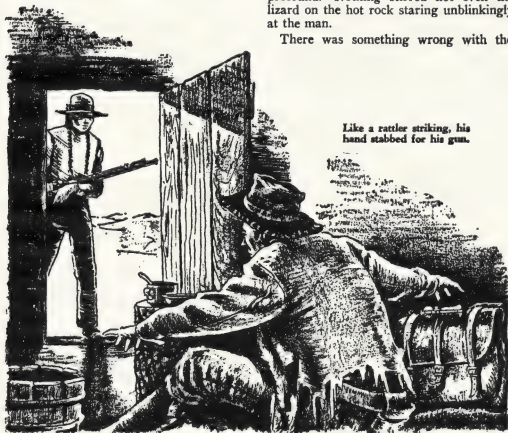
THE Civil War was in full swing and the great Butterfield Stage Line by the southern route had become untenable. Concords, teams, and crews were transferred to the Atchison, Denver, Salt Lake City, Placerville run, and the stage stations were abandoned. One of these was the Vallencito station, in the Vallencito Wash, where the stage road out of the Colorado Desert entered the hill country of southern California.

For over two years the adobe structures stood deserted and forsaken in the sun-

scorched wilderness. Then one day a man astride a limping horse came riding from the north down Sentenac Canyon. Behind the ridden-out horse trudged a patient burro laden with an iron-bound chest. Though the man looked worn-out and sat slumped in the saddle, he still wore a sixgun and a well-filled cartridge belt. From the saddle boot protruded the butt of a rifle.

The man halted by the abandoned station. The sun stood hot in the sky, and the heat and silence lay oppressive on the surrounding dry hills. The stillness was profound. Nothing stirred not even the lizard on the hot rock staring unblinkingly at the man.

There was something wrong with the



Like a rattler striking, his hand stabbed for his gun.

man. It was in the way he sat his horse, in the lines of his hard face, in the clutch of his hands on the saddlehorn. When he finally dismounted, he groaned. But though in agony, he yet forced himself to look after his horse and burro, letting them drink from the tepid water of the nearby *ciénega*.

He was very particular about the old chest, dragging it in a corner of the station. Lying down beside it, his rifle and sixgun within easy reach, he slept.

For two days the man lay in the deserted station. Outside, his burro fared well, the horse poorly.

The third day the man got up and managed to prepare some food he had brought. As he was eating, he heard a sound by the door and looked up to find an Indian staring at him.

Like a rattler striking, so swift was the man's stab for his gun. He had it trained on the Indian, his finger tightening on the trigger. Then a thought seemed to strike him. Still keeping his pistol at the redman, he motioned him inside.

There he ordered the Indian to pick up the iron-bound chest. Following the white man's orders the redskin fastened the chest on the burro and then took the pick and shovel leaning against the adobe wall and led the beast down the wash, the bearded one following on the horse, keeping the weapon trained on his captive.

From his actions it was plain that the man was familiar with the surrounding country. And small wonder, for some years ago he had been a station tender at Valencito. He went then by the name of Bert Flaming, which was probably a purloined name, for a prospector by that name had been murdered for his gold long years before in the diggings up the Yuba River.

As things piece together from the meager facts in records and the mumbled reminiscences of old-timers, bits of rumors and scraps of hearsay, it appears that before coming into Butterfield's employ, the bearded one had been a member of Joaquin Murieta's gang, or at least had been so closely associated with that murderous band as to be familiar with their comings and goings and their secrets as well. And one of those secrets was the location of one of the gang's several burying places of nuggets and dust looted from murdered miners.

When in 1853 Joaquin Murieta and his

infamous lieutenant, Jack Three-Fingers, were killed by Captain Harry Love and his posse and the gang dispersed, this Bert Flaming fellow dug up one of the caches of stolen gold in the canyon of *El Rio de los Santos Reyes*, and fled south.

For some reason he didn't try to dispose of it. Maybe it was too dangerous to cash in on that much gold while the heat of the Murieta chase was still on. Maybe members of the gang were aware of the hijacking of the treasure cache and were hot on his tail. These things are conjectural. In any case, though Flaming was noticed around Los Angeles, he never aroused suspicion by any display of wealth.

The fact of the matter was that he had buried his loot in Pico Canyon, some forty miles north of Los Angeles in the hills at the head of the San Fernando Valley. While Flaming was sporting around in Los Angeles, some nester built himself a shanty on, or very nearly on, the spot where the gold was buried.

Flaming dared not dig it up again. Maybe he could have stayed in the hills waiting for the nester and his family to be gone some lucky day, but in those times it wasn't a healthy course to get caught skulking in the hills. The ranchers were mighty quick with lead and rope and were in the uncomfortable habit of acting first and asking questions later. It was probably this fact that caused Flaming to run short on cash and to take a job station tending at Valencito.

AFTER the Butterfield line was discontinued, Flaming went back to Pico Canyon. Though things were quieter now, Flaming still had a tough time getting his treasure back. While he was lashing the loot on his burro, the nester surprised him. There followed an exchange of lead, and Flaming arrived in Los Angeles with a piece of it in his lungs. He stayed in his room at the Bella Union close to his iron-bound box while a medico patched him up as well as that frontier quack was able.

Either the saw-bones didn't do a very good job, or Flaming was too anxious to be gone and didn't give nature time to effect repairs, for when he appeared at Valencito he was a very sick man. Likely the wound was not fully healed when he left and it had started bleeding again.

Flaming guided the Indian at pistol point down Vallencito Wash and from it turned west into Potrero Canyon, a box-like canyon in the Laguna Mountains now known by the alluring name of Treasure Canyon.

Far up Potrero Canyon the white man set the red man to work digging a hole. In that hole the chest was lowered, and then the Indian filled it again. After which the white man calmly shot him.

The white hombre left the redskin lie for the buzzards and coyotes to clean up. These desert scavengers didn't get to him, though, for a Cahuilla squaw who had watched the proceedings told the Indian's relatives, and they came and took the body away.

The white man went back to the station and, evidently aware that he was dying, wrote a letter. In this letter, which some Indian with superstitious regard for white man's magic later on gave to a passing prospector, evidently was the information—and likely a map—which years later brought a Georgia woman to Los Angeles.

What became of the white man is something of a mystery, for the close-mouthed Indians, from whom by grunts and growls and signs and black looks the story was collected and laboriously pieced together, became mum when his disappearance was mentioned. Probably they killed him before nature did.

In any case, a skeleton was found later on in Treasure Canyon. Whether these bones were the remains of the Indian, of the white man, or those of a later seeker after the treasure, slain by vengeful Indians or a double-crossing partner, is anybody's guess.

WE COME now to the arrival of the Georgia woman in Los Angeles. Asking endless questions and gabbing, as a woman will, she talked too much. So much in fact that after she left the city in a spring wagon with a hired driver, neither she nor the driver nor the spring wagon was ever heard from again. What became of her?

After her disappearance, rumors popped like toadstools about the Vallencito treasure. Mysterious whispered conversations took place over Scotch and tequila. Even more mysterious maps were produced and scanned and hastily pocketed again. Mys-

terious strangers came and went, furtively, cautiously.

Many men took surreptitious trips out to the deserted station. Some came back. Some didn't. What happened to the ones that didn't? Talk went the rounds that this was the place where Pegleg Smith had discovered his mine and that he was now living on cached nuggets, bringing back a handful at a time from his frequent excursions to the desert regions. If Pegleg did, he lived on it very poorly indeed, since most of his whiskey-consuming during his later years at the Bella Union bar depended on his mooching drinks from strangers.

Perhaps the prospector who sped the letter on its way had first steamed it open, read its contents, and rifled the cache. In any case, no one ever boasted of having found it. There is one very strange fact though, that rather forceably closes the door to future seekers to this particular treasure.

In late years a man with a scientific turn of mind and a great trust in mechanical gadgets, got himself a radio device for detecting metal underground. This man—who for obvious reasons does not wish his name made public—was familiar with the Vallencito legend. So he sped out there with his new-fangled doodad and started prospecting a la Marconi. And, yes sir, right there at a likely looking spot in Treasure Canyon his ear-phones started yowling to beat hell. And the man dug.

He nearly experienced heart failure when a few feet down he unearthed an iron-bound chest. With trembling fingers he tore off the lid. In it he found—nothing? Well, not quite. There was a glass jar. A modern glass jar. Inside it was a piece of paper. And on that paper were written two words: "Ha, ha!"

That was all. Whether a previous digger had found the treasure there and had left this as a stinging hoot of derision, or whether this was the hellish humor of a practical joker—*quién sabe?*

Anyhow, the man didn't want his name mentioned. His feelings were hurt. His faith in gadgets is as sound as ever; his faith in his fellow man not.

After it was all over, he remembered how easy the digging had been—as if the soil had been loose. It was the only thing he had to be thankful for.

"Cowboy," said the dude, "if you'll shuck them guns, I'd like to give you a good whipping before I kill you." Chuck didn't mind that; he could swing a fist as well as the next man—but what he didn't know was that the dude packed a long and hungry blade. And he aimed to feed it on Chuck's life-blood!

**By Everett
M. Webber**

CHAPTER ONE

Slaughter Canyon

THE rain was cold, driving in rattling sheets before the wind that howled up the canyon. Shivering, Chuck Marlin swore as, with wet fingers, he tried to roll a smoke in the lee of big Pete Wendell's back. The smoke was for the stranger whose life blood was fast running out on the ground by them. Instinctively Chuck ducked as the rifle off to the left, beyond the barricade of boulders, crackled again in the dusk and lead splatted into the canyon wall behind him.

"He's cashin'," Wendell growled. "Why didn't we have the brains to keep out of this?"

Marlin shrugged. "Maybe he'd of sided us if it'd been the other way around. But we can make a try out of here, come dark, if they're not rolling boulders down on us from above by then."

The stranger opened muddy, painclouded eyes. "Got—that—smoke rolled?"



"Comin' up." In a lull of the rain, Chuck finally got the soggy quirkly to burning and stuck it between the dying man's lips. After a drag or two, it went out.

"Let it go," the man whispered. "I—listen, Marlin, I—" He broke off in a violent fit of coughing, and Marlin watched him steadily, narrow eyed. They had been much too busy the past half hour to do any swapping of names.

"Marlin," the man wheezed, "them rannies—shootin' at us—is after the same thing—I was—and that's you. I was to get—thousand dollars—if you never showed up at Turbio—" A sudden grin flitted on his

BOSS of RUNNING- IRON RANCH



“Knife!” somebody cried, and he saw Dalman drawing a thin, murderous dagger from a boot scabbard.

ashy lips and faded just as suddenly. "Why, you dirty—" Marlin suddenly hushed, aware that he was talking to a dead man.

"The ornery skunk!" Pete burst out. "And me letting him use my slicker. But it don't rain where he is now—"

He peeled the garment from the man and put it around his own thick, wet body. Motioning him to silence, Marlin peered through a crack in the barricade. For a moment he thought he had seen something move out there, but the half dozen cartridges left between them, and the single shell in the dead man's Sharpe's, allowed for no pot shooting.

Abruptly he muttered, "Looky, Pete. Next time one of them rannies shoots, let out a yowl like you're killed, and—"

In the same second, a rifle barked and Pete gave a choked bawl like a stricken bull.

"Fine," Marlin whispered. "You—"

"Fine!" Wendell choked wrathfully, getting his neckerchief to his jaw, and Marlin saw a white welt running through the red stubble. "If I'd been an inch closer to that bullet—"

Marlin shushed him. "Not so loud. We'll fix you in a minute. Rain's tryin' to quit and if we don't hurry—here, take the Sharpe's—"

He rolled the dead man to his face and caught him above the skinny hips, and then he cried. "You got my buddy and that other jasper. I'm comin' out after you—"

He heaved the man upright, and felt the body jerk in his hands as six-guns volleyed and a Winchester gave a stuttering blast, and a piece of quartz knocked from a boulder buried itself in his arm, and the body flopped out of his hands across the barricade. With wild cries, the four gunhawks charged forward, and then Marlin heard a cry: "Easy, boys. This may be—"

Marlin wheezed, "Now!" to Pete, and came upright. The .45 in his hand jumped twice with the recoil, and the man nearest him went backwards against one of his pardners. Startled cries rang out. As he fired again, Marlin heard the comforting bellow of the Sharpe's at his left in Pete's hands, and black powder smoke was in his eyes and nostrils, and then all was silent before him.

He stared numbly at the three men

sprawled among the rocks and bitterweeds. Then came a scramble of shod hoofs. The fourth man was gone. Marlin turned, a retching weakness in his middle, and then his chest suddenly tightened as he saw Pete on hands and knees. Marlin knelt, but before he could speak, Pete struggled to his feet.

"That—dang—cannon knocked me down," he groaned, feeling his shoulder. "I'd allus heard they killed buffalo by puttin' the butt against 'em and pullin' the trigger—" He hushed, staring at their three late enemies. "Cripes, Chuck—three with one shot. That's a real little gun. I aim to keep her—"

Marlin stared at him, started to speak, and then with a grunt he got his sleeve up and jerked the jagged sliver of quartz out of his arm. He let it bleed a little before he bound it up with his neckerchief, and then he clambered over the rocks. The three men were dead enough, all right. Swiftly he thumbed .45 cartridges out of the shell belt of one of them, and then he took the man's slicker. He had lost his own, with his horse, half a quarter down the canyon when the rain first started.

BESIDE the body of the man Marlin had used for a decoy, Pete cried, "Looky! I was gonna see what time it was by this varmint's watch and on the back it says, 'To Governor Boots Kilgore from Clay County Friends.' Imagine that—a governor, out gunning for me and you—"

Marlin snorted. "Road agent, you mean. Kilgore was a big pot-gutted guy that was governor twenty years ago. Used to come down to hunt deer with Dad—"

He turned to the body himself, but the pockets offered no scrap of identification. And then, just as he was giving up, a damp letter slid through a hole into the lining of the coat. It contained a single sheet of paper. Moving under the overhanging cliff a few yards away, Marlin squinted at it in the near darkness. The writing was poor and in the dusk the letters swam and danced, but slowly Marlin read aloud: "Bearer is Turk Gilman. Will handle M. for you, though it is really worth more than your price to keep M. off the Cross 8."

"M—that's you," Pete said. "Who's it to?"

"It don't say," Marlin told him drily, "and it ain't signed."

Pete screwed up his big face as if he were thinking. "Well, now," he said, "who would want to keep you away? The old goat that owned the Cross 8 that your dad loaned the money to, it wouldn't be him, because he's under the daisies, and besides him there ain't a soul at Turbio either of us ever saw or heard of—exceptin' this Judge Prickett that wrote to you."

Marlin nodded slowly, putting the letter in his shirt pocket and buttoning down the flap. His body heat, held in by the slicker, was beginning to warm him. "He did say there would be a good healthy range fight and a spitfire girl thrown in with the 8. Maybe one side or the other—or both—don't want any outsiders. If this Worthen that owned the 8 left heirs—well, maybe they wouldn't love me. After all, a lot of people could be making a grab at 40,000 acres."

The rain had diminished to a few scattering drops and the moon was trying to break through the racing clouds.

"That ranny that got away," Marlin said. "We better travel before he gets over his scare and decides to waylay us."

They found Pete's horse a couple of hundred yards away, standing with those of the dead men that were tethered behind a slab of fallen rock as big as a line shack. Marlin's horse was down the canyon so he took the best of those before him and turned the others loose before heading for his own animal to get his bed roll and war sack.

Morning found them skirting a vast cedar brake at the foot of the thousand foot walls of the Spotted Dogs. They had slept cold, without a fire to dry them and with cold jerky for supper. Temper ragged, his belly growling, and a vast craving within him for some coffee, Marlin rode ahead on the vicious brute he had drawn.

"Wisht we had them hombraes back alive so we could kill 'em again," Pete growled. "I—hey, what you tryin'—"

His voice broke off as Marlin struggled to keep his seat on his lunging, rearing horse. The animal smashed into Pete's horse, nearly throwing them both, before Marlin got it curbed. And then Marlin swore, shocked and unbelieving, as he pointed.

Before them, just across the branch that

cut the trail, the body of a young puncher swung by the neck from a cottonwood. Guns were in his holsters and his hat clapped grotesquely on his head. It had been done a full eighteen hours ago.

"Easy," Marlin whispered. "Smoke—or rather somebody wantin' fire without smoke—"

CHAPTER TWO

Plot and Counter-Plot

PETE sniffed. "Cedar, all right." Then he said, "Chuck—look. There's them twin peaks, like on the map on the back of the judge's letter. That means we're on—or dang near on—Cross 8 range. And that kid there—"

"—is part of the range war. Let's follow up that fire."

Anchoring their horses in the brush, they snaked through the clawing limbs of the cedars to their right along the creek, and the roar of a fall grew steadily louder. Presently they came to where the water pitched off into a long, sheltered valley that lay a hundred feet below.

Marlin froze. A lone puncher was flipping the ropes off a fine blooded mare with a fresh Cross 8 brand. A colt was scampering nearby, and Pete whispered, "Look—the little one has a Bar S. That jigger is running Bar S's into Cross 8's—and makin' you rich fast. That's A-rab blood."

"There's something smells plumb bad in Denmark," Marlin observed, his voice drowned to the brand blotter by the thunder of the fall. "In a Claiborne County range war about now somebody would cut down on that hombre with a 30-30."

"I got my buffalo gun back to my horse," Pete offered hopefully, "but we wouldn't want to be shooting one of your own men. Still, that might be a Bar S rider doin' some dirty work to make it look bad for the Cross 8—"

"Oh, dry up," Marlin advised wearily—and then he swore, startled, as the puncher took off his hat to wipe sweat from his face. "A girl!" he snorted, staring at the red-gold hair.

She mounted her own horse then and headed toward the herd of mares and colts at the far end of the valley.

"It's the gal the judge wrote about,"

Pete opined. "The spit-fire. Boy, you better be careful. She'd take a hot iron to you—"

He hushed as a kid on a pinto raced out of a draw at break neck speed, riding toward the girl. She drew up, then turned to meet him, and after they talked together a minute they both rode back to the fire. Kicking sand over it, they buried the irons, and then went off the way the boy had come.

"Aimin' to finish the job later," Marlin decided.

Ten minutes later they found a way down into the valley for their horses, with a pole gate at the bottom blocking the stock pastured there, and took the trail of the riders. It led them presently under the shoulder of the cliff which towered upwards of eight hundred feet, sheer and ugly, above them.

Then, suddenly, as they rounded a turn, a narrow gorge opened before them. The trail into it was well worn, and Marlin led the way in. The horses' hoofs roared and rattled back and forth in the passage, and Marlin touched his spurs to his mount to get out of the spooky place quicker. The pass was fully a half mile through, and he was glad when they came out.

A mile below at the foot of the benches was a fine set of ranch buildings—sprawling adobe house, three windmills churning away with the water overflowing the tanks to water a grove of young trees—apparently an orchard. The barns and two long bunkhouses showed no life, and the corrals were empty.

Only a few scrub cattle were in sight—and scrubs had never put up that set of buildings. This was new land to Marlin. Nor had his father seen it—but forty years ago his father had staked an old saddle pard to a new start in life with a thousand dollars in cash. And now, Judge Pricket had written, this old saddle pard hadn't forgotten. Bradded from behind three months ago, he had left all he owned to his old friend, who was now dead. And so it had fallen to Marlin, the son.

No one was in sight as they finally came up to the buildings and rode around the house toward where several Bar S horses stood hip-shot, stamping flies. The animals ridden by the boy and girl were standing by the porch, still breathing hard.

Voices came to Marlin as he rounded the

corner, and he saw the young pair confronting three men on the long, shaded porch. Marlin's look swept to the leader of the trio—a vast man, pushing three hundred pounds. He wore a light grey frock coat, and a rusty beaver hat was above his bland, lantern jawed face. His left arm ended in a steel hook.

"I'll tell you now, Hook Lasaris," the girl was saying in a low, deadly voice, "I've been blotting the brands on those mares you stole from us. I've done twelve of them. And I'll tell you this. I'll drop you like a dog—or any man of yours—if ever I catch you on Cross 8 range again. I've stood all I will—"

She saw Marlin then. "If you're riding the grub line," she cried at him, "the cook-shack's at the back, but you'll have to cook it yourself. The cook has left."

Marlin blinked uncomfortably into the smoky blue eyes that were still snapping with anger. He got his hat off. "Thanks, but we ate yesterday—"

"Then if it's a job you're out of luck. These varmints have rustled off the stock till there's nothing to do—and I couldn't pay you even if you lived till pay day. Which you wouldn't, because Hook Lasaris would have you shot in the back before tomorrow night."

"Well, shucks," Pete burst out as Lasaris flushed and shifted from one foot to the other, "you'd as well take us on. We're handy with runnin' irons. We'll gun these gents out of the country an' rustle your stock back and some of theirs along with it—and Marlin here, he—"

"Marlin?"

The three men looked as startled as the girl, and Marlin, still looking at her, was aware that Lasaris and his underlings swapped quick significant glances.

"The same," Marlin said. And then he threw Lasaris a look and decided to take a long chance. "Lasaris," he drawled, "let's get over in the shade of that cottonwood and make a little heavy medicine."

"Lady," Pete burst out, swinging his horse around a little, "less'n you got a strong stomach, you better go on in. That range dude on the far side over there is aiming to cut down on me first chance he gets, and I aim to kill him when he does it—"

The range dude, a slender, dapper man

in fancy clothes, looked a little startled, and the freckled boy, evidently the girl's brother, threw Pete a sudden grin. Lasaris growled at his two men.

"On your horses," he said. "No funny stuff, Dalman. Well, Marlin?"

It was coming to Marlin that Dalman had a familiar look, and then he knew where he had seen him. He was the fourth gunman who had escaped last night. Swinging from his horse, he moved toward the cottonwood. Dalman stopped to tie the strings of one of his fancy laced dogie boots and came up in a smooth sweeping motion with a .38 in his hand. Marlin heard the girl cry out and the kid shout, but his own gun was firing through the holster already and Dalman dropped, motionless. His bullet, meant for Pete, tore up the ground under Pete's horse.

"Served the dang fool right," Lasaris rumbled. "Put your gun up and come on if you're cravin' a habla."

He deliberately turned his massive back on Marlin and strode on as the other gunman rolled Dalman to his back and dragged him toward the shade.

"Get 'im away," the kid yelled. "We don't want 'im drawin' flies around here."

At the cottonwood Lasaris faced Marlin. "Well?"

"I'm Turk Gilman," Marlin said calmly. "This Chuck Marlin is kicking hot ashes in the sweet bye and bye. Me and Pete Wendell there met up with 'im two days ago. I brought his watch and a letter he had on 'im, and I'll swap them for my pay."

Lasaris did not turn a hair. "You planin' on runnin' in to the Cross 8 as Marlin, huh? That's not a bad idea. You come into town after dinner and I'll settle up with you and you can get the deed to the 8. This fool girl wants to get back East—she was just waitin' for Marlin—and soon as everything is settled I'll take the whole business off your hands and you can clear out before the marshal—the federal man, I mean—gets onto you."

Marlin nodded, wondering just how much Lasaris was fooled. The big man said, "I ain't got much with me—but just to show good faith—" He pulled out a wallet and fished out a couple of worn hundred dollar bills and passed them over. "Well—be seein' you. Don't get that fool girl ruled up."

He went to the horses and helped his man trig Dalman's body on his snorting animal. As they rode away, he said, "That there is Marlin trying to pull a windy. We'll have him pushin' up daisies before good dark. Him and that ranny is the ones Dalman and the boys had it with yesterday."

"And they're all dead now," the other observed thoughtfully.

Lasaris turned cold blue eyes on him. "You wanting your time?"

"Me? All I'm wanting is my sights lined on that jigger."

Lasaris nodded. "You can take a room over the Silver Dollar. We'll have a poker game on up there and the boys can swear you was at the table every minute."

CHAPTER THREE

Dudes Use Knives

"I—UH—I understood you were maybe a little short of money," Marlin told Anne Worthen after he had found out that was her name, "so I arranged to get some cash from Lasaris. I reckon, seeing the things you figger he'd done to you, we won't need to count on paying it back."

Wonderingly she took the money.

"Pay it back!" the kid cried shrilly. "Not never. He robbed Uncle J. C.'s foreman of thirty thousand dollars from the last trail drive and he's run off more'n a thousand head of cows, lots with calves, and—"

"You—you borrowed this?" The girl's eyes searched Marlin's.

Loosening his cinch, Pete drawled, "Bet he taken it with a gun. He's a reformed road agent."

Marlin threw him a stony glare. "Well, the fact is, I told Lasaris I was a fellow named Turk Gilman that somebody had hired to kill me off, just taking it for granted he was the somebody, and that is part of my wages."

The girl exclaimed, "Well, of all the brass—" Her voice dropped as she added, "There's feed at the barn. Tim," she turned to the kid, "get them up some dinner. I've got to get out and see if I can find Len." She added to Marlin, "Our last hand didn't show up last night. He wasn't the kind that would run out on us and I'm afraid—" What she was afraid of showed in her eyes.

"Just a kid? White Stetson and new chaps?"

She nodded in fearful affirmation.

He told her then what he and Pete had run upon there above the valley where she was branding the horses, and she listened, tearless and wooden faced. Finally she said, "He was to have been married tomorrow. This will all but kill his girl. I tried to fire him for his own good but he wouldn't go. He got one of the men that we were sure dry gulched Uncle J. C., and—oh, I hate this country, I hate it. Nothing but killing and stealing and meanness—"

Abruptly she turned and went into the house. She called back, "Tim—ride—ride over to Mamie's and get her dad out and tell him."

Turbio Tanks consisted of a single muddy street running between perhaps a dozen ill-assorted buildings. In the steamy heat, Marlin led the way up to Judge Prickett's office across from the Silver Dollar saloon. And then suddenly he pitched from the saddle catching Pete and dragging him down with him. On his knees, he clawed for his gun but it was gone, and then as a Winchester slug zinged past his ear he found his weapon in the trampled mud. He fired twice, jumped clear of the acrid cloud of powder smoke, and then he saw the gunman across the way hanging across the window sill above the Silver Dollar. Slowly his rifle slid from his fingers and clattered on the sidewalk below.

"You hurt?" Marlin wheezed.

"Hurt? No, I've just about got my back broke, is all, you crawling around on me in this mud. I didn't even get a shot at that jigger."

MARLIN sensed the heart-felt thanks under Pete's raillery as they scraped mud off. A crowd was gathering, including Lasaris and a man who wore a star.

"You two done that?" the sheriff asked.

"Gilman," Lasaris broke in, "this here is Sheriff 'Slow' Poke. Did that man over yonder ask for this?"

Marlin nodded briefly. "In a way. I saw him reflected in Judge Prickett's window yonder. Any objections from anybody?"

"All I got," Sheriff Poke mourned, "is that the county ain't paying no polecat bounty. But I will buy you a drink. Boy,

Judge Prickett'll be plenty sore when he gets home and sees that bullet hole in his window."

"I'll see you later, Gilman," Lasaris said, turning to cross the street.

The saloon was empty as the three entered, except for a bartender and a girl, on the stairway leading above at the back. She was laughing hysterically.

"Boy, did he drill him!" she cried. "Billy is gonna love this. Give me a drink, One-Eye—"

"Oh, shut yore trap," the barkeep growled, throwing his one-eyed look at her. He slid a bottle and glasses down the bar.

The sheriff poured. "This Billy she's talkin' about," he told them in a low voice as the barkeep went to the girl and profanely urged her upstairs, "is a brother of this Sig Dalman that I understand you got this morning out at the Cross 8. And likewise he's a cousin of this guy hanging on the window sill over there."

Marlin raised his brows at the sheriff. He was thinking, "where does the sheriff really stand in this?"

"Billy Dalman," the sheriff said, tossing off his drink and chasing it with water, "he'll take your hide right off and cram it down your throat if you ain't plumb careful—and I'm saying this with all the respect in world for the man who finished Sig. Billy is hell on wheels, hell among the ladies, hell with a gun, and hell with both knife and fists. Not much bigger'n you—"

The air was suddenly electric. Marlin looked about to see a crowd approaching the doorway. They fell aside from a man, neatly mustached, more of a range dude even than the deceased Sig Dalman.

He halted in the doorway, staring at Marlin. "Cowboy," he drawled, "if you'll shuck them guns, 'I'd like to give you a good whipping before I kill you."

Marlin unhooked his belts, his eyes never leaving Billy Dalman's tall, panther like body. He laid the belts on the bar.

"It's my time," Pete Wendell declared, a little drunkenly, moving toward the approaching Billy Dalman. "I'd shore—"

He ignored Marlin's call as Dalman reached for his buckles. The fall from the horse was getting mixed up in Marlin's brain with the raw liquor he had drunk. Anger surged within him as he strode up behind Pete and thrust him aside. Then

he made a lunge for Dalman, who, apparently thinking he had two men to fight, reached for the guns he had tossed upon a table.

Marlin leaped, kicked the table aside, and Dalman's fist caught him in the middle. Marlin stumbled backward, pain needling through his lungs, and Dalman was upon him again. Marlin gave him a feeble uppercut that held him for a second, and then Dalman bore him against the bar, giving him short, a harp licks, low in the belly. Marlin's breath came back then. He raised a knee into Dalman's face and drove a short, vicious hook into the back of his neck, but there was no power in his arm and Dalman wasn't out. With a choked cry, he caught onto Marlin for support.

Marlin fought down the sickness in his belly from the licks he had taken, and gulped in air.

"Knife!" somebody cried, and he saw Dalman drawing a thin, murderous dagger from a boot scabbard. He caught him by the hair, raised his head, and drove a blow full into his mouth that sent him plunging across the floor into the arms of Lasaris who was just coming in.

Lasarís let him fall, took in the situation with one cold look, and then jerked Dalman to his feet with his steel hook, leaving a quick spurt of red on his shoulder. With one mighty blow in the face he sent him crashing out the door where he lay still on the walk. "You're one hell of a guy," he snarled. And then turning to Marlin he said, "Gilman, I'd like to see you and that other heller in my office—quick as you can get there."

CHAPTER FOUR

Gunsmoke Duel for the Eight

"CARDS on the table," Lasaris said, eyeing the punchers watchfully across the desk. "I'll put mine. I know who you are. I know you probably killed Turk Gilman, though Sig Dalman figured last night he had done the job. Well—you've ruined my best men. Men who were worth fighting pay and getting it. I've got others, but if you two want to come in with me I could use you. We're playing for a fortune—and not what you think. We don't need or want the range. I'm willing to give you a nice figure for it after you take over,

and to give the dang girl enough to make her feel good—"

Marlin, aware for the last thirty seconds that a gun muzzle was trained on the room through a small hole in an inner doorway, rolled a smoke.

"All right," he said. "I'm Marlin. I didn't kill Gilman. Your own men killed him. It seems they jumped him while he was waiting to dry gulch me and Pete here. What's the attraction of the Cross 8 for you—Spotted Dog pass?"

He saw that his chance shot had gone home. Lasaris' eyes showed surprise for the briefest flash, and then he nodded frankly. "That's right. There's a railroad coming through here—and the pass would save them more'n you might think in tunnels and detours. But it won't do nobody else any good. I've got the boys at the capitol in with me, and if we don't get the gravy off that pass the road'll go plumb off north of us a couple hundred miles. That dang girl won't be reasonable. She just gets her back up and fights—"

Marlin looked at the muzzle of the gun again, and then at Pete who was also regarding it. Amusement suddenly showed in Lasaris' bland eyes.

"All we're asking," Marlin told him, "is free passage to the street. After that you can sic your bull."

Lasarís sighed, tapping the desk with his steel hook. "All right. But don't say I never warned you."

A faint plume of dust, on a rocky hillside where the sun had already dried the sand, hung on the air toward the Cross 8.

"That would be Billy Dalman," Pete observed, "taking a short cut. Either to the 8—or somewhere else. And if I was him, I believe I would waylay me and you."

Marlin nodded. "Still, everybody'd know who done it—but on the other hand, after the way Lasaris put it to him maybe he's leaving the country. Maybe—maybe if he was handled right he would tell where Lasaris is keeping the cattle he rustled from J. C. and Anne, or at least where he sold them."

Untying his horse, Pete said, "Likeliest place, if he means us any harm, would be that sharp turn at the clump of service berries below that little bluff where all them bitterweeds is growin'."

After a broiling hour of Indian work afoot and on hands and knees, they found themselves at the top of a long, rocky slope a quarter of a mile above the service berry clump. There was little cover between them and the man, lying down there atop the bluff with rifle in hand, but what there was—scrub oak and boulders—would help.

"Wind's with us," Marlin whispered. "But we got to go easy. You start a pebble rollin' an' she'll go jouncing clear to the bottom."

"My knees is done raw and my hands cooked, but come on."

A gun roared as Marlin's Stetson jerked from his head and he dived instinctively for the shelter of a ledge, aware that Dalman could be no more than ten or a dozen paces away. He scrambled to his knees and then he saw Pete wildly hurl a rock and go tumbling behind another boulder. The gun crashed again and there came a sprawling, scrambling sound.

Marlin was up in time to see that the rock had knocked Dalman down and he covered him. Sitting, Dalman gave him a wild look.

"Up with 'em," Marlin said softly.

Dalman eyed his pistol two paces away, seemed to consider the other in his holster, and then slowly raised his hands. He was naked from the waist up, his body tanned through the thin silk shirt he seemed to love, and Marlin knew that the dummy down there was his shirt and chaps and hat. Pete disarmed him.

"Now," Marlin said, "you'd as well shell down the corn. Show us where Lasaris has got the stuff hid and we'll give you ten minutes to get out of gun range."

Dalman shook his head. "Not me. I've not played my string out yet."

Pete said, "He's like a pair of them jiggers that caught me in the Claiborne county war. They knew how to make a man talk. We'll tie 'im with his belts and kick a little woods together and get a gun barrel hot."

Pete tied the man, gathered enough greasewood and dead limbs around the scrub oaks and lit a fire behind a big boulder. He put the barrel of Dalman's .45 in it, and swiftly then he cut away Dalman's fancy boot below his leg bonds and pulled the foot of the boot off while Marlin watched in stoney calm. It was a question, he knew, whether they would bluff Dalman

out, or whether Dalman would bluff them out.

"She's gettin' red," he told Pete with a glance at the gun.

"Them guys that had me," Pete said calmly, "they got theirs white." He stirred the fire, but presently he said, "She ain't gonna get white, so—" With his neckerchief, he gingerly pulled the .45 from the fire and headed for Dalman.

"Gents, gents!" Dalman cried, the sweat bursting over his face and belly. "For Gawd's sake, don't burn me. It—it's under the floor of the old house in the Dead Man's Valley—"

Marlin and Pete stared at each other, puzzled, and then Pete bawled, "The money! The thirty thousand they took from J. C.'s foreman after the trail drive. We'd forgot it. And the cows—"

"They're in the valley," Dalman almost sobbed. "Now let me go. You said you'd give me ten minutes—"

"After you showed us what we wanted. Not when you just told us," Marlin reminded him.

With a rope around Dalman's neck, his hands tied to the pommel of his saddle, they rode first to the Cross 8 to tell the news. But only Tim was there. The dead puncher's body had been taken to his sweetheart's house, and Anne had gone there. He lit out on his old pinto to tell her the money and cattle were found.

A two hour ride, half of it after moon up, took Marlin and Pete and their captive through one gorge after another until Marlin suspected they were being led astray. And then suddenly they came to a gate shutting off the narrow canyon into which they had ridden.

"Hold it," a voice drawled.

Marlin felt his heart skip a beat, and then he snarled, "Oh, open the gate, you cussed fool. The boss wants Dalman kept out here a day or two till he can tend to 'im. He burned down that fool U. S. Marshal and if things get too hot the boss is aiming to turn him—what you waiting on up there?"

The guard opened the gate. It was darker here, the moon unable to penetrate the pines and aspens that rustled above. Marlin let Pete and Dalman go through. Then he rode past and the guard gave a grunt of surprise, staring at Marlin. But in one

blinding flash, Marlin's sixgun swung down and clipped the man across the temple as a startled, involuntary cry broke from Dalman. The man went down, cold.

"Drag 'im into the brush," Marlin told Pete, "and tie 'im. Somebody else might be around."

Ten minutes later, after riding through bedded and grazing cattle, they saw the bulk of a house loom up. Marlin released Dalman's hands as they halted.

"Down with you."

"You—you'll give me a little stake out of that, won't you, gents?" Dalman wheedled. "After all—"

Marlin yanked on the rope. "Down," he repeated. They herded the man into the house. Pete struck a match and touched it to the lamp on the table.

"If the cash ain't here," he warned, "why—"

"It's here," Dalman told him. "Cripes, nobody but me and the boss and Sig knowed it."

At Dalman's direction, the lamp was carried through the kitchen and into another room, bare and unused.

"That board there," Dalman said.

Pete knelt and got the board up with his knife.

"Here she is," he said flatly. "Little bags of gold," and a great relief burst over Marlin.

Pete started dropping the bags into the saddle bag he had lugged in. And then suddenly above the shriek of katydid the sound of riders, drumming off the hoof-silencing sand and grass, came to them from the yard. Lasaris was bawling orders.

With a sudden burst of energy Dalman jerked the rope free of Marlin's hands and ran through the kitchen toward the front door. Marlin caught Pete's gun hand.

"All right, Dalman," he yelled, "take 'em at the front and we'll get them at the back—"

"Dalman's double crossed us!" somebody cried, and then as Pete dived through a back window shots blasted away in front. A second later Marlin was through the window, rounding the house to the side of Pete who calmly raised a gun and squeezed the trigger. Lead ripped into the corner of the house and as Marlin jumped back, firing, he felt a sudden shock, but no pain,

in his left arm as it fell limp at his side.

"Ease up, you crazy jigger," Pete told him. "They wasn't but three of 'em, and—"

At a sound behind them, Marlin whirled. Lead knicked at his ear as a gun roared point blank almost in his face. Marlin fired again and beyond the bloom of smoke he knew his man was down and unmoving.

But around at the front a voice spoke. "Marlin—you there, Marlin? You know me?"

"Lasaris," Marlin said. The man was behind a fallen horse.

"You've shore tore up my playhouse. Give me an even break and I'll draw with you—"

"Like you gave old J. C. and his punchers?" Pete cried. "We'll gun you like a dog—"

With a wild, laughing cry, Lasaris lunged forward shooting. Marlin knew that Pete was firing and then that he was swearing as his gun was knocked from his hand. Marlin felt fire ripping through his shoulder. He pitched against the front wall of the house, slumped down, and struggled back to his knees. He saw Lasaris jamming shells into his gun, holding it deftly between the stub of his arm and his body.

With intense effort, the world swimming around him, Marlin groped for his .45 on the ground. He found it, raised it somehow, and fired. Lasaris started. Slowly he dropped his gun. He said, "Marlin—you—you've—you've—" He half raised a hand to his face and then slid down across the horse as Pete charged toward him.

Pete halted. "More coming!" he wheezed. "More riders—"

Marlin tried to rise, and then Pete was helping him, but before they could get into the shadows the riders swept up. Marlin recognized Sheriff Poke. And then he saw Anne Worthen. He was getting sleepy as she came toward him.

"Don't try to get up," she told him. "If—you'll—still be here—when I wake up," he heard himself saying, "I could rest."

"I'll be here," she told him softly. "It—it's going to be a grand country now."

"Cripes amighty!" Pete drawled.

But Marlin didn't care. He felt Anne's hand, cool as it held his own, as they came to carry him into the house.

KILLER SWAP-OUT

"HOW much you want for this dump?" Hawk Wirley shifted his bulky body in the saddle and threw his weight on one stirruted foot. His short, hairy hands slipped meaningly toward pearl-handled guns at his hips. He waited impatiently for old Nevada Hobson's answer.

It was a long time coming. Nevada twisted his head to one side and squinted up at his unwelcome visitor out of his one seeing eye. "Rightly, Mister Wirley," he mumbled slowly, "the little store ain't worth

Luna Valley was the only real home that gaunt, stove-up old Nevada Hobson had ever known, but saloonman Hawk Wirley delivered the ultimatum that was worse than Boothill for the oldster: "You got twenty-four hours to pack your duffle and skinny carcass the hell out!"

With a last desperate effort he raised his hand and aimed slowly.



By Ruel McDaniel

much and it ain't much for anybody else to want. But it makes me a livin'. I don't know how else I could live, without the store. So I don't hanker to sell, I reckon." His voice was tired but patient, like a weary father reasoning with a headstrong boy.

Wirley glowered. His hands moved to his guns and tightened there. "My brother Dude's takin' over the wagon-yard next door tomorrow. He wants the feed store. He'll run 'em together. There ain't no weasel-faced, one-eyed varmint goin' to stand in his way."

Wirley deliberately lowered his voice, for emphasis. "I'll give you a hundred dollars. No more. Take it or not. You got twenty-four hours to clear out yore skinny carcass and duffle." He touched silver-mounted spurs to his beautiful bay and turned toward his Silver Dollar saloon.

Old Nevada's left hand went involuntarily to a deep scar in his scalp, the result of a gun-lashing he got from Hawk Wirley five months ago. His rheumatic-twisted right arm useless at his side, he turned and walked slowly back into his combination feed store and bunkhouse.

Nevada Hobson long ago had reconciled himself to the fact that he was one of life's stepchildren. For the past few years, though, things hadn't been bad—not really bad.

Luna Valley was his home—the first home he'd had since claim-jumpers had slaughtered his family when he was nine. He had managed to save a few dollars from odd jobs to buy the little feed store at one corner of the wagon yard. From it he was making enough money to buy food.

Some folks in Luna Valley pulled crude jokes on him, and a few pushed him around, but to most of them, it was just a little raw fun. Nevada had developed a world of patience through the lonely years and so he liked most of the folks in Luna Valley.

There were two men who did more than pull jokes on him and push him around. He hated these two men with all the hates in his repressed, lonely soul.

And now one of these two men he hated was threatening the only thing he had ever owned. Now, because of this man, he was faced with pulling up his stake in Luna Valley—the only town that was his home.

WIRLEY had never cared particularly about horses until Morg Hitt came to town, opened the Cattleman's Bar and drew admiration from the populace with his fine riding horses. From that day, it had been a contest between the rival saloon men as to which rode the finest mounts. Nevada in his humble way, traded now and then for a horse which he felt he might turn for a little profit. He had obtained a fine Palomino from Morg Hitt. Hawk's gun-whipping was a reminder that thereafter Nevada should be more careful about selling fine horses.

Yet in spite of the whipping, Nevada got no sympathy from Hitt. Only three weeks ago Hitt had booted him out of the Cattleman's Bar because he refused to dance for a drunken crowd. And six months before that, Hitt had knocked him down the steps and injured his back so that doctors' bills ate up his meager savings of two hundred dollars. He had every right in the world to hate Hitt.

People were amused, in a grim sort of way, at the vain rivalry between the two saloon men. "It's just a matter of time till they'll swap lead," they agreed. And it was a toss-up as to which would come out alive. They were both excellent gunmen, with a certain cunning to go with their marksmanship. And so Luna Valley more or less sat back and waited for the fireworks.

Nevada Hobson lay in bed late the next morning. Why should he rush around and wait on customers and try to build up trade, when his business was to be taken away from him at sundown that same day?

A raucous voice broke into his bitter thoughts. It was Hawk Wirley again. "Weasel-face," Hawk yelled from outside. "I'm ridin' down country to look over some horses. You better be out of here when I come back. And I'll be back 'fore dusk!"

Nevada mumbled and slowly climbed out of bed. He dressed and dashed his face with cold water. Fumblingly he rolled a quirly with his left hand and stuck it, unlit, between his thin lips.

He wracked his brain for some way to hold onto his little feed store. How about going to Morg Hitt and asking him to speak to Hawk Wirley about it? But be-

fore the suggestion had fully materialized, he knew the futility of that. He did not mind humbling himself to appeal to a man he hated, if it might save him from another man he hated as much. But he knew it would do no good. In the first place, Hitt and Wirley were not on speaking terms. In the second place, Morg Hitt did favors for nobody but himself. He'd probably boot Nevada out of the saloon for presuming to ask for help.

Noon, and Nevada was more miserable than ever. He walked down to the lunch stand and ate a plate of red beans, but he had no appetite. This might be his last meal in Luna Valley, he thought bitterly, and his chest tightened.

Finally, he returned to the feed store and began methodically to gather up his meager belongings. At least, he told himself, he had saved a little money. Enough to buy a plug of a horse to take him out of town. That was something. He had walked into Luna Valley, the soles of his feet making tracks through his worn-out boots.

He had finished packing and was just sitting there in his creaking chair when a stranger rode up. The man dismounted and came furtively into the store. "You Nevada Hobson?" he asked, tilting his hat to one side of his head. "Well, get this: I'm Dude Wirley, Hawk's brother. Hawk told me to send yuh down the back trail about a mile, with a horse. He'll be waitin' there for yuh. And shake the dust out yuh're joints. He's in a hurry!"

Nevada looked up at the jaunty young man with mild contempt. He was a little surprised at himself for his senses had been deadened for so long that he did not think he could be contemptuous of any person. Dude impressed him as a man who wanted to be tough because he had a brother with a reputation, but did not know exactly how to go about it.

He nodded to young Wirley, without bothering to say anything. He took his time going back and borrowing a horse from the wagon yard.

UNDER the shade of a cottonwood stood Hawk, holding one of the most beautiful horses Nevada had ever seen—and he had seen many. The animal was built with the alert legs and body of a thoroughbred.

It was coal-black but its mane and tail were light brown, lending a contrast to the sleek blackness that was astonishing in its beauty. Nevada whistled as he saw the animal.

"You was long enough gettin' here!" Wirley grumbled. "Now here's what you're to do. Ride this horse up this trail till you reach the alley behind the wagon yard. Ride through the back gate of the yard and stable the horse. Don't let anybody see him. Then you wash him down and brush him off. And you better do it right. Keep yore mouth shut about it. I want to give Hitt a little surprise bright and early tomorrow mornin'!"

"He's a beauty!" Nevada commented.

"For that favor, I'll do you one," Wirley concluded. "You won't have to clear out till tomorrow mornin'." Hawk mounted the wagon yard horse and raked its sides with spurs.

It was a pleasure to handle an animal so beautiful, even if it did belong to Hawk Wirley. The horse could not help that, Nevada reasoned. He washed the black with deliberate care, and he went over it with curry-comb and brush many times, not because he had been ordered to do so but because he could forget his own misery in handling so fine an animal.

As she stroked the almost golden mane, a startling thought came to him. His thin lips parted in a smile. Then the smile vanished and a frown creased his high forehead. No, that was out. Of course Hawk Wirley and Morg Hitt had not hesitated to abuse him at their every whim, but he could not bring himself to do the thing that came to his mind. That would be criminal, in a way. But, on the other hand, didn't an underdog have a right to use his brain to square things, when he was so handicapped that he could not use a gun like other men?

It was almost sundown now and yellow dust settled over the short street in a lazy haze. He walked slowly to the feed store, his forehead creased in indecision. He wished he could get that infernal idea out of his mind. It was cowardly, in a way. Yet a fellow had a right to square things, didn't he—when the chance came?

Suddenly the decision flashed through his mind, and his body trembled a little.

He eased back through the wagon yard

and out of the rear gate. Two blocks down, on the same side of the street, was the Cattleman's Bar. He followed the alley until he reached the rear of the saloon and then eased inside. He asked the Chinese cook to call Morg Hitt. "And don't tell him who wants him," Nevada cautioned.

"What the hell!" Morg roared, when he saw who it was. "I oughter kick you right out for botherin' me. What's the idear?"

Nevada grinned apologetically, but there was nerve in his gray eyes. "You want to see the finest horse in Texas?" he asked boldly.

"And if I did, where?" Morg growled.

"At the wagon yard. Cheap, too."

"Don't say nothin' to anybody—not anybody, understand? And I'll be down tomorrow to see it." Hitt's attitude changed miraculously.

Noting the saloon man's interest, Nevada grew a little bolder. "If you want the animal, Mr. Hitt, better come with me now. It might not be there tomorrow," he added truthfully.

"Well, wait here a minute." Morg went back to the bar and presently returned, his guns buckled around his waist. "Come on," he ordered. They followed the alley back to the wagon yard.

One look at the beautiful black was all that was necessary to throw Morg Hitt into a frenzy of enthusiasm. "How much?" he asked eagerly.

"Two hundred dollars," Nevada said evenly. His heart pounded against his ribs. Fear chilled his spine as full realization of what he was doing came to him. Momentarily he regretted the crazy idea; but now it was too late. Morg Hitt had seen the animal.

"You probably stole him," Hitt jockeyed. "Give you one-fifty."

"Two hundred," Nevada answered, "and what do you care whether I stole him or not? Nobody could take him away from you, could he?"

"You damned right not! Here. Here's the two hundred. Now go and get my saddle. I got some ridin' to do, afore dark!"

MORG mounted the black and majestically rode into the street. The Silver Dollar was between the wagon yard and his own saloon. He rode slowly, holding the reins taut, to make the black more

spirited. A broad smile wreathed his long, brooding face. His black Stetson sat far back on his head, and his bandanna fluttered in the wind.

Shivering with pent-up emotion, Nevada Hobson stood in the doorway of the feed store and watched. Morg had not ridden more than a few yards before people began stopping and admiring the fine animal. Nevada saw two loungers in front of the Silver Dollar gaze in astonishment at the horse and rider, then turn and dash into the saloon. Nevada's legs almost buckled.

As Morg neared the Silver Dollar, he deliberately pulled the black over to that side of the street. He wanted to be sure that Hawk Wirley would see.

It happened even sooner than Nevada expected. When the horse and rider reached a point some fifteen yards from the Silver Dollar, the bat-wing doors suddenly crashed open. Hawk Wirley stood there shaking with rage.

"You damned hoss-thief!" he shouted. His hands skinned toward his guns.

Morg yelled something, but nobody understood. All eyes momentarily were on the enraged Wirley.

Hawk's guns barked and he plunged toward the rider. Hitt tumbled from the mount, untouched. He spanked the animal as he touched ground and crouched. His own guns came out blazing.

Both men crouched and weaved. Wirley fired twice more. Hitt's left shoulder sagged. But the lead slowed him for only the flick of an eyebrow. He fired again.

Hawk suddenly yelled and his left hand flew to his chest. He plunged to the dust. With a last desperate effort, he raised the gun in his right hand and aimed slowly, uncertainly. He pulled the trigger.

Morg Hitt seemed suddenly to go stiff in his tracks. A moan came from deep in his throat. Then his knees buckled under his long legs and he settled slowly.

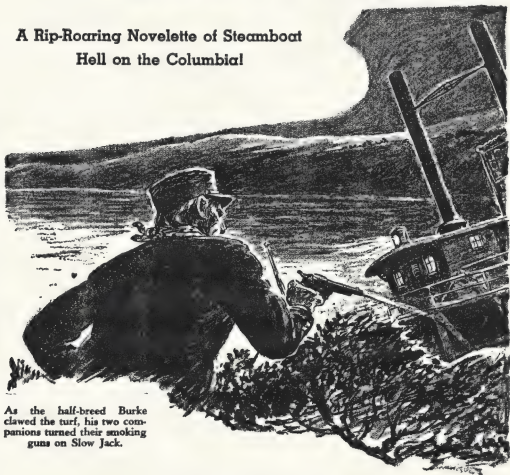
Both gunmen were dead when the amazed spectators reached them.

Nevada Hobson wiped cold sweat from his forehead. Slowly he turned around and walked to the back of the little feed store. Methodically, he unpacked.

He had a feeling that he would be proprietor of the Luna Valley feed store now as long as he lived, even in spite of Dude Wirley.

• BUST-'ER-TO-

A Rip-Roaring Novelette of Steamboat
Hell on the Columbia



As the half-breed Burke
clawed the turf, his two companions
turned their smoking
guns on Slow Jack.

CHAPTER ONE

"With Boots or Fists"

SOMETHING was going to happen. Slow Jack Snow was sure of it. He stared through the pilot room windows at the Columbia's broad channel, his eyes a reflection of the gray river itself.

Aided by the current's seaward sweep, the *Bluebell* was plowing the water as swiftly as any stern-wheeler Slow Jack had ever handled. Yet a glance to portside revealed the smoke-belching *Thor* forging steadily ahead.

Slow Jack Snow lifted a hand from the shiny maple wheel and curried his silver-

blond thatch. A stern-wheeler of the *Thor's* size and class had no business traveling at such speed. Swinging to the speaking tube which led to the engine room below, he spoke in the drawing, deliberate basso which had gained him the name "Slow" Jack.

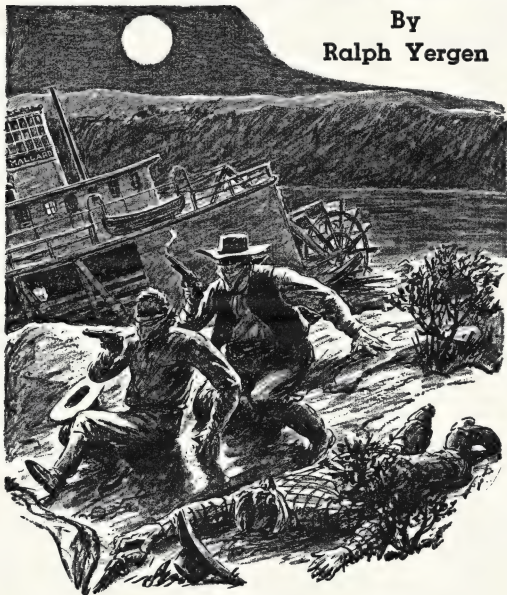
"More steam, bucko! Dave Carter's tub is swimmin' away from us!"

The engineers' retort stabbed his ears. "You want me to blow her up? She's over the limit right now."

Slow Jack shrugged wide, angular shoulders. He planted his big feet well apart and gripped the wheel with long, steel-sinewed fingers. His lank frame was bent slightly forward with the excitement of the race.

HELL-an'-GONE!

By
Ralph Yergen



The whistle of the once-proud Columbia River queen sounded like a lonesome paean of doom as she streamed straight for the bushwhack trap laid by the skipper—who was man enough to damn himself for destruction, along with the packet he loved!

Beneath a long, tapering nose, his mouth was a straight, hard line. Although shadows rimmed his eyes from long hours at the wheel, he was not aware of weariness. To Jack, piloting was not work. It was the essence of living.

From the start, the race with the *Thor* had been close. Most of the way from Lewiston down the treacherous bends of the Snake and the Columbia's booming rapids Jack had glued himself to that wheel. His ten years' experience guiding boats on this upper river route might prove to be the deciding factor, he had reasoned.

The leisurely manner of his speech did not extend to his boating nor to his muscular movements when the occasion demanded speed. Never yet had Jack Snow lost a boat race. He did not want to lose this one. A big shipping contract awaited the winner, and Jack's intent was to land it for his employers.

The Deschutes landing, finish line of the race, lay around the next bend, and Jack's alarm increased as another glance confirmed the *Thor's* widening lead. Across the water he could discern the triumphant leer on big Dave Carter's pie-shaped face as the *Thor* owner bellied against the wheel in the glass-walled pilot house.

The tautness of antagonism strung through Slow Jack's lanky frame. Always he had known there must come a time when he would lose a race. But the thought of losing to his old enemy, Dave Carter, galled him savagely.

They had been enemies ever since Jack could remember. They had fought like young wildcats in their days along the Dalles City waterfront. Their rivalry continued past adolescence. They had even courted the same girl. They had battled so continually over her that she had grown disgusted with both and married a Portland real estate man.

Both Dave Carter and Slow Jack Snow had turned to the river. Jack had worked his way to a captain's job for Columbia Freightway. For ten years, he had been accounted the Columbia's top pilot.

More on the mercenary side, Dave Carter had acquired several boats and formed his own company. That contract would mean a fat profit to Carter, and Jack had known his old enemy would try every scheme his cunning brain could concoct in order to win

this race. But still Jack could not understand how the *Thor* had suddenly developed the terrific drive to pass the *Bluebell* here in the final stretch.

Shore rocks seemed to march backward as the *Bluebell's* paddles churned the curving channel to frothy foam. A fresh length of river swung into Jack's vision, rolling westward toward the rock-walled gorge that split the blue Cascades like a giant's cleaver. Far down the willow-greened shoreline, below the Deschutes mouth, landing timbers jutted into the water. Even at the distance, Jack could see the throng assembled to view the finish.

The *Thor* was moving a length in front now, her paddles whipping the river to a fierce frenzy of foam.

In a tone of desperation, Jack shouted into the tube, "We're a whipped goose, bucks. Can't you lift her one more notch?"

"Not while I'm the bullgineer!" the reply snapped sharply out of the tube.

Slow Jack shook his head glumly. Of course the engineer was right. Better to play safe. He could feel the tremor of the laboring engines quivering through the boat. The heavy throb of pistons and the steady slushing of the paddles told him the *Bluebell* was doing her valiant best.

The landing was only a half mile away, and Jack could see the massed people waving their hats. The *Thor* was plowing ahead, lengthening her lead. The *Bluebell* was beginning to fishtail in the heavy wake.

Jack could picture the insolent grin on Dave Carter's face. It made tingling sparks spring up within him.

SUDDENLY it happened. A loud explosion split the air like a thundercrack. A terrorized scream pierced the echoes. For a fleeting instant, Jack thought the *Bluebell* was in trouble. Then he spotted white clouds of steam gushing from the *Thor's* water deck. Dave Carter's enraged cursing rolled over the river.

"Cut steam!" Slow Jack yelled into the tube. "Carter's tub has blown her boiler!"

Although he was as startled as anyone at the explosion, Jack had been expecting something of the sort. It was obvious Dave had been crowding the craft beyond her limit. He saw two *Thor* crewmen dive from her main deck into the river. Steam clouds billowed from the boat, but there was no

sign of fire except from her smokestack. Her paddles groaned to a halt, and she coasted with the current.

As Jack steered the *Bluebell* past the slowing *Thor*, he looked down and saw his own crewmen hauling out the two who had lost their nerve and jumped. There seemed nothing urgent to be done for the *Thor*, and Jack let the *Bluebell's* sharp prow slide through the water toward the quay.

"Half reverse," he called. "We're coming in."

The engineer obeyed, and they touched landing timbers with a gentle thump.

Griming at the crowd's wild applause, Jack locked the wheel and jammed his flat-crowned cap over his blond thatch. Below, anchor chains rattled and a capstan whined as the crew made fast. Jack darted out of the pilot room and went down the steps like a long-legged cat.

He heard somebody shouting. "Two men killed—the *Thor's* engineer and fireman."

"Losing two men won't disturb Dave Carter. But losing this race will," Jack muttered.

As he sprang to the main deck boards, the stump-bodied purser caught his arm excitedly.

"We better give Carter's outfit a tow. She'll drift clean to Celilo and over the falls. She'd be smashed to jelly."

Jack looked past the madly jabbering throng on the landing. A patrol tug was steaming away from shore.

"They'll bring her in." He slapped the purser on the seat of the pants and called to the assembling crew. "Good boating, men. I'm proud to be your captain. See the purser for pay. And don't forget the Steamboat Club tonight."

After arranging for the stevedoring crew and cargo portage past Celilo Falls to the lower river run, Slow Jack Snow left the *Bluebell* under the watchman's care. With a sheepish grin, he pushed past the horde of back-slapping men and climbed the sandy slope to where the stableman awaited him with a trim-limbed sorrel horse. As he settled his lank frame in the saddle, loud cheers for him thundered from the wharf.

The *Bluebell* captain rode away with a smile on his lips, but with a good deal of skepticism in his mind. If the *Thor* hadn't blown her boiler, those same people would

now be cheering Dave Carter. Jack Snow would be a forgotten river rat. Further, Jack knew Dave Carter was not the type of man who would accept his defeat in a spirit of sportsmanship. He could look forward to a fresh flare of trouble from Carter. It came more abruptly than he expected.

TOWARD midnight, the Steamboat Club at Dalles City buzzed with activity. A connecting point for the upriver run and the lower route to Portland and Astoria, Dalles City was a bustling little town at any hour. But tonight the dramatic finish of the race between the *Thor* and the *Bluebell* had filled the town with a holiday spirit. And the Steamboat Club was the favorite haunt of rivermen.

Liquor flowed in a steady stream across the long, crowded bar. Cards rustled, chips clinked. Men laughed and cursed as pay checks changed hands with dazzling rapidity. In the various huddles, boats were overhauled and sunk and surfaced again. Battles were fought, and many a record cargo was transported on the steam of human lungs.

Alone for the moment, a mellow cigar in his mouth, Slow Jack Snow tilted his chair against the wall and watched the revelry. He had turned down all offers of drinks in his taciturn way. He could not drink with one man and not another. And he could not drink with them all unless he wanted to get in a stinking state. Nobody had ever yet seen Jack Snow in that condition. Thus the lanky pilot was stone sober when Big Dave Carter swaggered into the spacious club room.

Dave Carter was built like a frontier fort. His shirt bulged from the swath of knotted muscle across his chest. Planted solidly on a short, thick neck, his massive head was covered with coarse black hair. His flat face was flushed a stormy shade of red, as he moved to the bar and swung about to scour the room with glittering black eyes almost hidden by bloated lids.

The room's hum closed as men watched Dave Head's stare settle on Slow Jack Snow and grow ugly.

Jack shifted his stogie to the corner of his mouth and drawled calmly, "Tough luck, Dave."

"Luck, hell!" Dave Carter snarled. "That boiler was tampered with."

Silence swooped over the room abruptly. Games halted. Men stared. Nobody had to be tipped off that Dave Carter was liquor-bold and looking for a battle. Slow Jack leaned back in his chair, utterly relaxed. Yet his cool, gray eyes did not waver from the man in front of him.

"You hear me, Snow?" Carter rumbled. "Somebody monkeyed with that boiler gauge when we was docked in Lewiston. Somebody sneaked on board and slipped past the guard. They fixed the gauge so it registered forty pounds too low. Hell! Accordin' to the needle, we wasn't even runnin' the limit when she blew. Maybe you think I don't know what low-livered son-of-a-buzztail did that, Snow!"

Jack sent a blue cloud of smoke ceiling-ward. "Haven't heard you say."

"It was you, Snow!" the big boatman spat. "You're the smelly coyote who sneaked on board at Lewiston and set that gauge so's we'd be a cinch to split a boiler head. You'd better not be denyin' it, neither. Or by the gods, I'll take the price of a dead engineer and stoker out of your yellin' hide!"

Jack lazily tapped the ashes from the cigar tip. It was easy to see through Dave Carter's accusation. Carter was the kind of a man who was always blaming others for his defeats. He was manufacturing the lies to save the sting of losing. And trying to pick a fight to display his physical power in the eyes of the river town.

Tension gripped the room. Men edged forward on their seats, aware that a clash was impending. Jack had not come to blows with Dave Carter since the early days when he had piloted the big river boats over the Columbia's swift currents only in his dreams. He doubted that the passing years had made Carter any softer or less tricky. Yet his voice was provokingly deliberate. "You're a liar, Carter. A plain, ornery liar. And you damn well know it."

A bellow of rage rolled from Carter's throat. He snatched a whiskey bottle from the bar and launched himself at Jack, his head lowered like a bull.

Men scurried out of the area like frightened chickens. A table overturned, and poker chips sprayed the floor. Jack Snow pounced to his feet, his movement deceptively swift. His hand gripped a chair rung as he pivoted to meet the big

man's charge. As the bottle hurtled toward him with all the force of Carter's full-arm swing behind it, the chair under Jack's fingers spun up to meet it.

At the crash, glass and splintered wood flew over the room. Jack felt the wet splatter of whiskey in his face. He dropped the broken chair and jabbed out sharply with his left fist to meet Carter's renewed rush.

The wide-bodied pilot blocked the blow. Jack dodged a whistling fist and slipped to one side like a shadow. He smashed a solid punch into the man's ribs. As Carter whirled, he aimed another at the jaw, but Carter was ducking and absorbed it high on the cheek.

Jack lashed out with both hands, trying to drive the man away from him. But Carter lowered his thick skull and plowed at him, his short, beefy arms reaching for a wrestler's hold. Jack danced backward, trying to escape the clutching claws. He tripped over a chair and tottered floorward. A hand closed on his arm and almost jerked it from his shoulder. He sent a jolting short-arm punch against Carter's chest, but it failed to feaze the powerful pilot.

JACK was suddenly lifted high in the air. He kicked at his assailant, but succeeded only in jarring Carter's grip. He was thrown clear, and landed on his shoulder blades. He kept on rolling until he crashed against the wall. Half dazed by the shock, he swiveled on his back and doubled his legs, turning his bootsoles toward Carter's oncoming charge.

The man's yellow teeth were bared in a snarl of hate and rage. He leaped in an effort to jam his heels into Jack's lean stomach.

"Look out, Snow!" somebody yelled above the hub-bub. Jack straightened his legs in a swift movement. His own boots caught Dave Carter squarely in his mid-section bulge.

With an explosive grunt, Carter reversed motion and sat down forcibly on the floor. Jack scrambled to his feet. He bent low and plunged in fast, his fists cocked for a vital blow. But Carter's hand came zooming around, clutching a heavy brass spittoon.

Jack dodged back. The spittoon swished past the end of his long nose. He drove in again before Carter could cover after

that vicious swing. His fists beat a lightning tattoo on the beefy face, transforming it to a purple pulp. Keeping his blunt jaw plastered against his chest, Carter backhanded a swing with the spittoon. The heavy metal glanced off Jack's ribs.

Pain shot through the lank pilot. He reeled back, gasping. Still armed with the spittoon, Carter leaped to his feet and came at him, growling like a wolf.

Jack heard the warning shriek of watching men. He side-stepped and banged into a table. Seizing it by the legs, he whirled and flung it in front of him.

Big Dave Carter crashed into the table top, slid sideways and went careening off balance toward the bar. Jack leaped past the table wreckage like a cat. He slashed a sharp uppercut under the wide nose. It lifted Carter's chin clear of his chest.

The spittoon came whizzing at Jack in a wild, sweeping swing. He drove in fast. Carter's arm was wrapping about him when his right fist collided with jawbone. With all the power of his body behind it, that punch cracked like a splitting iceberg.

The big man suddenly seemed to freeze stiff. The glitter of rage faded from his eyes. The cuspidor bounced on the floor, and the next second Carter's massive weight collapsing on the board made the building quiver.

Slow Jack Snow leaned against the bar and shook the dizziness from his brain. Men crowded about him, filling his ears with a confused battle.

"Bueno fight, Cap."

"Carter got what was comin' to him."

"Slow Jack Snow, the champ—with boats or fists!"

Jack swabbed the blood from his face, not hearing much of what was said. Somehow the fight had sickened him. He pushed through the throng to the door and walked out into the cool night air.

The street lights cast a yellowish glow over the dark-coated men and the brightly-gowned women streaming along the sidewalks. An orchestra blared from the dance-hall in the next block. A couple of drunks were wobbling in the gutter, yelling and waving at the passersby. A group of big-hatted cowpunchers from the south prairie galloped past and swung to a dust-plowing halt in front of a garish saloon.

Dalles City was having one of its big

nights. But the gaiety did not penetrate Slow Jack Snow's mood. Leaving the others to celebrate his victories, Jack turned down a deserted side street toward his room at a boarding house on the town's outskirts. It seemed fantastic that the Columbia River was not big enough for two men. Yet he carried with him a troubled conviction that Dave Carter would not be satisfied with his beating. Sooner or later, it would come to a powder-and-lead showdown between them, a battle to Boothill's shadow.

CHAPTER TWO

Hog-Leg for a Steamboat Man

DALLES CITY was lazing under the warm touch of afternoon sun when Slow Jack Snow again stalked along the main street. He was wondering how conspicuous his holstered Colt .45 appeared to the occasional acquaintances he greeted with a word and a smile. None mentioned it, however, and Jack decided a gun-toting steamboat captain should look no stranger than a cowpuncher with a hog-leg on his hip.

Jack had donned the gun because of that persistent feeling about Dave Carter. Humiliated by his double defeat, the ugly-tempered boat owner could be expected to switch to gunplay next, and Jack wanted to be ready for anything he might start.

The sooner the showdown came, the better it would suit Slow Jack. He was no slouch with a sixgun. He enjoyed shooting, and had practiced many times in lonely canyons near the river. He kept alert for Carter, but the man did not appear on the street.

As town life bored Jack Snow, the river always intrigued him. Always his eyes were turning waterward.

At the foot of the slope where the town buildings reached down to the landing, the top decks of several idle steamboats glistened in the sun. Across the river to the north, the broken bluffs of the Washington shore towered into the sky's soft azure. Westward, the river stretched away into the silvery distance, winding toward the snow-robed Cascade peaks, where it pried its way through on its irresistible surge to the distant Pacific.

From those downriver reaches, the deep,

mournful sound of a boat's whistle came faintly to Jack's ears. His blood stirred, and he shielded his eyes against the sun to watch the craft appear as a toy ship in the distance.

A voice hailed him, and Jack wheeled to see the stern-faced, gray-maned manager for Columbia Freightway crossing the street, a brown cigar clamped solidly in his jaw.

"Excellent work, Captain," the executive praised, in a mellow baritone. "I've been looking all over town for you. The *Bluebell's* win closes a deal we've been trying to land for a year. From now on we haul all freight for Inland Wheat Growers. And that's considerable. Your next pay check will be somewhat fatter."

"Thanks, Mr. Vickman," Jack said. "Guess we were just lucky. Dave Carter crowded his engines a little too far."

"So I heard." Vickman wagged his stogie thoughtfully. "Carter is a trouble-maker. He hates your guts, Jack. I know he asked for that whipping you handed him last night in the Steamboat Club. But it won't help matters any. Since he's gone in business for himself, he's showing all the earmarks of a freight hog. I'm glad to see you toting a smoker. You'll likely need it."

At dusk as Jack emerged from a barber shop, he spied Dave Carter's burly figure in the shadows across the street. Carter was conversing in low tones with two of his hard-face boathands, a swart, scar-faced man and a buzzard-beaked halfbreed who could pass for a gunman in any company. The dark man pointed. Carter looked around at Jack and glowered.

Jack stood on the sidewalk edge and lighted a fresh cigar, calmly awaiting any move they might choose to make. After an indecisive moment, Carter heeled about and led his hirelings through the nearest bathing doors.

At his regular off-river retirement hour, Slow Jack left the Steamboat Club and walked up the side street toward his room. It was a familiar stroll, with the glow of street lamps interlacing the tree branches in a network of light and shadows. As usual, the silent street was deserted and most of the houses were dark. Stray dogs raced across the vacant lots. The west wind whipped up little swirls of dust and scattered them into the night.

The shot rang out with nerve-cracking loudness. Alarm jarred Jack Snow to an abrupt halt. His right hand curled about the gun handle at his thigh. As the echoes rocked heavily through the town, his gray eyes were scanning the shadows.

The pistol had barked from behind the big, dark-windowed house at his right. Yet no bullet had whistled his way. He edged forward warily, his gaze prying through the black shadows which enveloped the vacant lot adjoining. Suddenly he discerned a dark figure on the ground.

"Looks like some hombre needs help," Jack told himself.

Whipping out his revolver, he glided toward the shape on the ground. This could be a trap, Jack thought. And with the though a red dart of flame tongued at him from the back corner of the house. The bellow of exploding powder filled his ears. He heard the bullet hiss wickedly near his head.

Jack triggered a quick shot at the gun-flash. But the man had ducked behind the house wall. Pressed against the building in the deepest shadow, Jack advanced like a stalking cougar.

THE surrounding area was silent as a tomb. Jack sensed that the gunman had slunk away. Down the street, men were yelling in puzzled voices. Jack reached the huddle on the ground. He saw that it was a man dressed in a black frock coat and striped trousers. He rolled over the inert body. A widening smear spread over the white vest.

Beyond help," Jack muttered.

By the dim street light, he recognized the marble-like face.

The man was Slick Foster, a tinhorn who followed the river boomtowns. Jack had once thrown him off the boat as Foster sought to fleece the passengers with his shady brand of poker.

A voice suddenly thundered into the night. "Drop that hogleg, Snow!"

Slow Jack froze in a half crouch. Icy chills zigzagged down his spine.

The threatening voice repeated, "Drop it, damn you! Get those hooks up—fast!"

Reluctantly, Jack let the gun slip from his fingers. He twisted about, his eyes seeking out the speaker in the shadows. Framed in a dark window of the big,

square house loomed the burly torso of Dave Carter. A gun barrel protruded from his huge fist, and the muzzle throated a silent black challenge at Jack Snow. The swart man and the buzzard-faced halfbreed Jack had seen with Carter earlier in the day filled the adjoining windows, each of them clutching a six-shooter.

Big Dave Carter's pie-round face split into a beefy grin. A harsh ring of triumph overtone his voice. "Get 'em up higher, you murderer!"

Jack felt a sinking sensation in the region of his stomach. Carter's words revealed the whole treacherous plot. Jack had shot once at the bushwhacker behind the house. That spent shell would be used to blame the killing of the gambler upon him. Under the menace of their guns, however, Jack could do nothing but obey the command.

"You've got the bulge, Carter," he gritted.

"You're damn right we have," Carter crowed. "All three of us seen you pot Slick Foster from the street. Foster was outside talkin' to Joe Bissell, my bookkeeper. Reckon you figgered Foster was totin' a fat backlog, huh, Snow?"

The bitterness of defeat seeped through the *Bluebell* captain. Dave Carter was using scheming trickery to accomplish what he had failed to do by brute force.

"You figure all the angles, Carter," Jack admitted. "I suppose you rented that house, knowing I always walked home past it, so you could see me shoot somebody."

Carter uttered a surly growl. "I bought this house to live in. It was just luck we seen you plug Foster. With your murderin' neck stretched, this town will be a damned sight safer for honest folk."

Carter rambled on, accusing Slow Jack Snow of all the unsolved crimes committed on the river's thousand-mile course.

The arrival of two men interrupted him. One was beady-eyed, fox-faced Joe Bissell. Jack had seen him about Dave Carter's river-front office. The other man was broad and blond with a close-clipped mustache. A brass star was pinned to his vest.

The fox-faced bookkeeper stabbed a sharp finger at Jack. "There he is, Sheriff," he yapped excitedly. "That's the one. That's the killer! Dave and the boys have got the deadwood on him. See?"

Sheriff Olson eyed the scene with a cold appraisal. "Slow Jack Snow, eh? Maybe you're mistaken, Bissell. Snow's record on this river is clean. Maybe the real killer vamoosed while you was hunting me."

Jack started to speak, but Dave Carter's rumbling voice crowded in. "Bissell is right, Sheriff. We happened to be lookin' through the front windows of my new house, here. We all three seen Snow beef Slick Foster." The sheriff listened to Head's story, then he stooped and examined Jack's gun.

"Only been fired once. I heard three shots."

"I shot twice," Bissell barked quickly. "Me and Foster was outside chawin' the rag. But Snow didn't see me behind the house corner. He only seen Foster and thought he was alone. When Foster went down, I ran across the back yard lookin' for a place to duck into. I spotted Snow sneakin' along behind me with a cutter. I plugged at him twice and missed. Then I lit out for your office before he could nail me, too."

Finally the lawman gave Jack a chance to tell his side of it. Olson listened gravely, then shrugged.

"Up to the judge. But I wouldn't want to be in your boots, Snow, with three or four witnesses against you. You'll have to set in jail till trial day."

The sheriff's gun came up to line at Jack's belt buckle. "Stick your paws straight out for the cuffs. And no funny stuff."

The locks clicked on Long Jack's wrists, and the sound was like a death knell of freedom. The harsh bray of Dave Carter's laughter followed him mockingly as he marched down the street ahead of the sheriff's pistol.

THE days and nights in the Dalles City jail a continuous torture for Slow Jack Snow. For hours he would sit on the edge of his bunk in the gloomy loneliness of his cell, an intense, consuming hatred for Dave Carter blazing inside him. He dreamed of squaring off in gunsmoke with the cunning riverman. But all of his hopes smashed on the cold walls of cement and steel.

Dave Carter had many friends in Dalles City. He and his men spread their insidious lies, poisoning minds against Jack Snow.

People forgot the years of Jack's meritorious service on the river. They thought of him only as a heartless gunman who was going to collect his just desserts.

Some of Jack's loyal old river friends came to spend a few minutes with him. Columbia Freightway sent a high-salaried Portland lawyer up the river to argue his case. But standing against him was proven ill feeling that existed between Jack and the gambler Foster after Jack had tossed the tinhorn off his boat.

With Carter and his hirelings blandly swearing they had seen Snow fire the shot that downed Slick Foster, the outcome of trial was a foregone conclusion. Against their testimony was only Jack's true statement, discounted by judge and jury as the desperate lie of a guilty man.

Jack listened to his conviction and death sentence without a visible trace of emotion. Yet as his last thread of hope snapped, a flat, sick feeling possessed him. Dying, bound and helpless at the end of a hang-rop, was dismal prospect. As he was led back to his cell, Jack saw Dave Carter swagger from the courtroom like a prize porker on parade.

That night, Slow Jack Snow stood for a long time at the narrow window, looking through the bars at the silent river below. A waning moon hung above the cliffs, laying a silky sheen of silver on the water. The far bank was like a distant fairyland, and the low white stars were lanterns in a velvet sky.

Down by the landing, the red and green river lights gave bright flashes of color to the night. Jack found himself yearning to hear again the deep, throaty blast of an incoming boat. But the Columbia was quiet tonight, as if in deference to the fate of one of its own, an upriver pilot named Slow Jack Snow.

It was long past midnight when Jack heard the faint clank of spurs on the adjoining office floor. The next minute, a shadow appeared at the cell door. Keys jangled. A hand fumbled at the lock.

Slow Jack watched, fascinated, as the door creaked slowly inward and a squat man shaped in the opening. The man was beckoning silently. Mystified, Jack moved toward the open door. The man stepped back and Jack could see him motioning for haste and silence.

With nothing to lose, Jack cat-footed out of the open door and through the sheriff's office to the main doorway leading to the street. He heard the cell lock click behind him, and instantly the squat man was at his heels.

"To your left," he murmured. "There's hosses waitin'."

Hope began to mushroom fast within Jack Snow. He was perplexed by the action, but just the freedom of the open air and skies above was enough to send his senses rioting. He stole a glance at the man who had freed him. The white glare of the moon revealed a flat-nosed face set in cruel lines with a wide, slash of a mouth and jutting chin.

Jack instantly recognized that face. The man's name was Butch LeBrun. He appeared in Dalles City intermittently with two companions. They were suspected of being outlaws, but Sheriff Olson had never bothered them. Why Butch LeBrun should spring him from his death cell formed a complete puzzle in Jack's mind.

Four horses became visible within the heavy tree shadows a half block up the street.

"Here we are," LeBrun muttered. "Hop on a nag, Snow. Foller us. But don't make no noise."

Two other men appeared and mounted. By the moonlight, Jack saw that they were LeBrun's regular companions. He did not know their names. One was gangling, with a studious face. The other was wolf-gaunt and dark as a Modoc.

They rode out of town via a tortuous trail which wound over the bluffs to the flat prairie above. Here the moon was glaring bright against the white sand and rocks. Finally Jack ventured words.

"Thanks for the break, fellows. But I don't quite understand how or why you did it."

LeBrun reigned in, his horse blocking the trail. His dark eyes drilled the pilot. "Easy. We tapped the jailer over the dome and swiped his keys. Could it be you don't know us, Snow?"

"You're LeBrun," Jack said. "That's all I know."

The leader thumbed the gangling, studious-eyed man at Jack's left. "This here is Homer Altcomp. He used to be a perfessor. Don't get skeered if he busts loose with

some fizz-dizzy words which don't mean nothin' to nobody else. This other jigger is Chiloquin Burke. He's a heller with a six and not slow with a stiletto."

Hatchet-faced Chiloquin Burke was a riding arsenal of guns and knives. In the brighter light, Jack judged him to be a mixture of white and Indian and as vicious a cutthroat as ever forked a saddle.

"If you ain't guessed it," LeBrun continued, "we're ridin' a mite beyond old John Law's range. That's why we sprung you tonight, Snow. I happen to savvy you got a raw deal and ain't got too many kind feelin's toward Dave Carter. That right?"

"I'd kill Dave Carter like a snake," Jack said bluntly.

LeBrun nodded. "So we figgered. Then you won't buck at helpin' us relieve Carter's boat of a hundred thousand dollars worth of gold about two nights from now."

"Don't know why I should object." Jack's keen gaze roved from one to another. Did these bandits really want him as a partner? Jack could conceive of no other logical reason why they were risking the law's detection to free his neck of the tightening noose.

"Then it's a deal?" LeBrun queried.

"A deal," Jack agreed.

ALL night and the following day, they rode east over the dry prairie. At sundown, they camped in a desolate canyon. As they clustered about the fire for a bed-time smoke, Butch LeBrun outlined the plan of their attack on Carter's boat.

"The tub's name is the *Mallard*. She'll be slidin' past here about midnight tomorrow. She'll be carryin' bags of gold from the Idaho mines in the middle of a cargo of wool bales. Homer was in Lewiston and got all the dope from some friends of his'n on the inside."

Jack was familiar with the *Mallard*. It was Carter's oldest boat, a craft of medium tonnage. "You want me to figure out a way of stopping her?"

Butch LeBrun nodded, blew twin streams of cigarette smoke from his nostrils. "You know boats. You're a handy man with a smoke-pole. We figgered there was enough coin in the job to split four ways. And with you in the party, we'd be strong enough to put it over without a hell of a lot of risk to ourselves. That rough stretch of water

called the Devil's Chute is only a short ways north of here. How about wreckin' the tub there?"

Jack had traversed the Devil's Chute many times. He knew every snarling current and every fang-toothed shoal in the treacherous maze of hell-for-pilots. The channel was a narrow, twisting trail which swung far towards shore between invisible rock ribs lurking close beneath the surface. It was fringed with buoy lights for night rapids on either the Columbia or the Snake.

"Perfect spot," Jack said. "Just move the channel lights."

"Just what I'd figgered," LeBrun barked. "We'll switch 'em in against the shoreline. The tub will bust her belly on them shoals. When the crew comes ashore to look for help, we'll scorch 'em from the rocks."

"Hold on," Jack said quietly. "It won't be necessary to kill anybody. We can wear masks. We can take the crew in a bunch and tie 'em up."

Butch LeBrun's eye bored into the pilot. "Be safer to mow 'em."

Across the fire, Chiloquin Burke slurred, "Chicken-hearted. huh?"

His gray eyes cold, Jack watched the firelight flicker across Burke's coppery face. Homer Altcomp's gaze was shifting from one to another in the manner of a professor viewing his pupils. Butch LeBrun waited, his stare menacing.

Jack could sense the sudden tension that stretched through the camp. Perhaps this was a test for him, he was thinking. They had not yet given him a gun. Perhaps they would decide on his reaction what to do with him next.

Jack's voice was deliberate, blunt. "The law wants me as a murderer. But I'm not a murderer. And I don't ever intend to be one. I'd kill Dave Carter. Sure. But I'd give him an equal chance. If you're looking for a shoot-from-cover bushwhacker, you picked the wrong potato. There'll be no mow-downs while I ride with the gang."

Jack watched the lines of Butch LeBrun's face harden. Burke's eyes glowed dark and hot. But the first words came unexpectedly from Homer Altcomp.

"Perhaps the captain is correct, gentlemen. Aside from the taking of human life, there is a point in thrift involved. Cartridges are expensive. A penny saved is a penny earned, you know. Let us follow the

captain's suggestion of rendering the crewmen to a state of complete inactivity with a mere length of rope. It should be easily performed."

Butch LeBrun growled, "Keno, then. No killin'. Let's hit the wool. We got a big night's work ahead of us tomorrow. Once we hook that there swag, we got to get on our hosses and dust."

As Jack left the fire, Chiloquin Burke was looking at him in a way that warned him to watch his backtrail like a hawk.

Unforgettable in his thoughts was his score with Dave Carter. Somehow, before he began the long trail south, he would contrive to hunt down the treacherous boat owner. For there could be no peace, no sanctuary for Slow Jack Snow until he had watched Dave Carter die in the swirling smoke from his sixgun.

CHAPTER THREE

Death of a River Queen

THE Columbia was like a carpet of silver lace winding through the night. On a rocky bench forty feet above the south shore waterline, Slow Jack Snow listened to the mellow music of the waters shattering to frosty spray against the boulders below. The three bandits squatted near him, smoking and conversing in low tones.

"It's a pip," Butch LeBrun was muttering, his masked face made blacker by the shadow of the towering cliff behind. "It's gonna be so easy it's almost a crime to take that gold."

Homer Altcomp analyzed, "A crime? In the more common sense of the word, yes. However, the mineral wealth of this nation should be public property. Why should the mining plutocrats be allowed to enrich themselves to a fabulous degree with natural resources which rightfully belong to all citizens? We are citizens. Our seizing what rightfully belongs to us certainly is not a crime in the more liberal code of an economic reformist such as myself."

"Peffessor, you uncorked a mouthful," Butch LeBrun agreed.

"And a half," Slow Jack added dryly. He did not need to be told why the gangling ex-professor was no longer pursuing education as a career.

"This earth is bountiful. If it were not for the greedy plutocrats and their vested interests, we would all live in peace and plenty," Altcomp insisted dreamily.

"It's about time that tub was showin' up," LeBrun rumbled abruptly. "You sure this was the night, Homer?"

"The source of my information is impeccable, LeBrun."

"The hell it is! We've set about four hours now. These here rocks are gettin' colder'n a lizard's belly. Homer, you damn sure you tied up that old lantern keeper so he can't get loose and sneak up behind us with a shotgun?"

"There's a bare chance the pilot might figure those lights run too close to shore. He might decide to reverse and tie up somewhere until daylight. But likely he'll be in too much current before he gets wise. That fast water will boom him right down here below us. He's bound to bust on one rock or another."

The bandit leader grunted approval. Chiloquin Burke did not utter a word. He squatted within the deep shadow, fingering his weapons in moody silence.

Jack shifted his cramped legs. Restlessness made him feel taut and uneasy. Like the others, he wished the *Mallard* would appear. He wanted to finish this unpleasant task and be on his way to hunt down Dave Carter.

Far across the Columbia's twisting currents, the Washington cliffs glistened in the moonlight like walls of ghostland. A chill breeze moved off the river, wafting to Jack's nostrils the fresh odors of water from distant mountain glaciers and green lakes of the northland.

A parade of memories marched through Jack's mind in jumbled disarray. Memories of days and nights at the wheel when he was pitting his skill against the raw power and tricky currents of the driving waters. Memories of blinding blizzards and vicious yellow floods, of many a good-natured game and many a fight in the river towns along the way.

An immovable lump formed in his throat. The river was the only kingdom he had ever known. The stately old stern-wheelers were his castles. He was leaving them forever, and his nails made white marks in his calloused palms.

His attention winging back to the task at

hand, Slow Jack Snow watched a cluster of lights float into view far up the river. The details of the boat itself were vague through the moonlight mists. But Slow Jack could picture her as if she were illumined by a brilliant searchlight.

Her sturdy, blunt bow was plowing deep through the water. Deckhands were padding along the shadowed passageways. The dark pilot room loomed to the fore above the hurricane like the head of a drifting swan. Engines throbbed softly, and the banging of the stoker and the crackling flames were loud sounds in the night.

The sonorous tones of the *Mallard's* whistle rolled over the night-clad water and shivered against the bluffs. On the rebounding echoes rode Slow Jack's wistful, wandering thoughts. He could feel the fibre of the whistle cord between his fingers, the vibration of the engines. He could smell the thick clouds of woodsmoke pouring from the stack, and the odor of hot oil. He could touch the polished maple wheel and veer the boat against the current's pull.

It was as if Slow Jack himself were inside that dark pilot room, his feet planted wide apart, his hands on the wheel. His gaze would be following the headlamp's beam over the dark waters. Ahead, he could see the protruding rocks, the white crowns, the glassy ripples of the Devil's Chute, the twin rows of red buoy lights, marking the narrow, twisting channel.

He could hear the throom of pistons, the steady slush of paddles, the laughter and the cursing from the engine room. He could feel the pulse of the boat in her rhythmic vibrations. If only in fancy, he was piloting down the Devil's Chute once again.

With a start, he remembered the lights. The channel lights were wrong. They were luring the buoy toward the hidden shoals! He was spinning the wheel madly, but the prow was not veering. It was plunging on toward the shallows, the lurking rocks. He was shouting to the engineer, jerking the signal cord. But the paddles were not reversing. Swept by the current, the craft was driving on faster and faster toward destruction.

SLOW JACK came to his feet with a jerk. He could feel the sweat on his forehead, cold and damp.

Beside him, Butch LeBrun yelled, "Keep down, you fool!"

Jack crouched, his hand on the sixgun which LeBrun had given him tonight. His voice was hoarse, brittle. "She's comin' right toward us. Toward the shoals."

"Sure. The scheme's workin' fine."

"She'll smash, man. She'll smash!"

Jack stared at the oncoming *Mallard*, her lights glittering across the water. Arrow-straight, she was zooming for the mouth of the lane fenced by those deceptive lanterns. In a minute or two her hull would crash into invisible boulders. In a minute or two, a stately stern-wheeler would be reeling and helpless, a broken, water-logged derelict claimed only by the gods of disaster.

No sight could be more tragic to Slow Jack Snow. The decision came to him with such stunning force that he could not watch a craft smash itself into splinters while he sat idly by. Not even Dave Carter's *Mallard*.

To Jack Snow, stern-wheelers were far more than carriers of freight. They were animate, floating traditions. Even though owned by evil men, they were to be cherished as a riverman's old and true friends. Being a part of the treachery which would end the *Mallard's* life would haunt him until the end of time. He whirled on the three bandits, ripped the mask from his face.

"To hell with it!" he blazed. "I can't sit here and watch that packet crash. I'm going to warn her!"

An instant of ominous silence followed his words. Then Butch LeBrun was on his feet reaching for him, his face furious.

"Get down, damn you! You're goin' loco. That's Dave Carter's tub. You know what Carter did to you?"

"Carter be damned. It's the *Mallard* you're wrecking. Not Dave Carter. The *Mallard's* a top-notch craft. I'll be roasted in hellsmoke if I'll bushwhack it. Stand back, LeBrun."

Butch LeBrun began to cajole and to threaten. But Jack was watching Chilouquin Burke. He spotted the 'breed's fingers streaking toward a knife hilt. Without touching his gun, Jack leaped backward over the bluff.

A snarl of hate and rage trailed him. Boulders blotted the bandit trio from sight as Jack landed on his feet in a bank of

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caked sand. He slid through a thick screen of willow brush which ripped his clothing and slapped him viciously across the neck. The speed of his plunge checked, he crashed through more windows and came to a halt on a narrow shoreline ledge.

Above, he could hear LeBrun's choking profanity. The renegades were averse to shooting, however, for fear of warning the boat's crew of skullduggery afoot. In the water near him, a cone-shaped boulder bulged about ten feet above the surface. Whipping out his sixgun, Jack plowed into the thigh-deep water.

Upriver, he could see the *Mallard* bearing into the Chute mouth. She was close enough for him to read her nameplate. Jack raised his pistol and fired at the nearest buoy light.

With the bellow of his gun, a red glare winked out. From the *Mallard* came a puzzled yell of alarm. Jack shifted his sights and shattered the next light.

A curse of rage sounded from the bluff above. A sixgun yammered, and slugs cut the water beside him. He powered on around the shielding boulder, waving his hat and yelling across the water.

"*Mallard* ahoy! *Mallard* ahoy! Look out. It's a trap."

He could see motion on the main deck. "The lights are wrong," Jack thundered. "Stick to the starboard!"

He lifted his revolver and wiped two more red glares from the river surface.

Yells sounded from the *Mallard*. But her speed did not diminish. On she churned, straight for catastrophe.

"Man ahoy!" came a puzzled cry. "What the hell's goin' on?"

Desperation crowded into Jack's voice. "*Mallard* ahoy! You're headed for the shoals. Stay clear. Stay north of the lights!"

Somebody from the second deck started to answer, but the booming blast of the whistle drowned his words. Jack shuddered. What was wrong with that fool pilot? Was he deaf or crazy? His craft was plunging toward destruction and the damned fool was unconcernedly blowing the whistle.

With the fading of the echoes, Jack could hear the throb of the *Mallard's* engines. She was picking up speed as the current caught her. She seemed to veer even nearer

BUST-ER-TO-HELL-AN'-GONE!

to shore. Now she was pointing directly toward the rock where Jack stood.

He aimed across her bow and emptied his gun. The shots proved useless. Jack's hopes flattened. The pilot either thought that somebody was trying to drive the boat to the north side rocks or he didn't give a damn what happened.

The *Mallard* hit the fast water and came booming over the rapids with incredible speed. Jack saw the flagpole looming above him. Cold alarm streaks shafted through him. If the hull didn't crack on something first, the *Mallard's* bow was going to smash into that boulder right beside him. He turned and plunged through the water toward the shore bluff.

Above, where the bandit gang was huddled, red needles jabbed the night. A hot swarm of bullets hissed past him, clunked into the water beyond. Only the concealing bluff shadow saved him as he drove through the shallow water and clambered onto the ledge.

A quick glance over his shoulder showed him the outline of the *Mallard* bulking into the sky. Her lights were still ablaze, and he glimpsed frightened faces behind the rail.

By some miracle Jack could not understand, the *Mallard* was clearing the shallows coming in. He was halfway up the bank, hidden by willows, went the big boat crashed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hell-Trap for a River Rat

THE *Mallard* hit with terrific force, her bow wedging between the cone-shaped rock and the ledged bank itself. There was a loud splintering of timbers. Lantern glass rained on the decks. The boat lurched and quivered like a mortally wounded bird. Slowly, with a groaning of hullboards, the stern settled into the water, tilting the decks at a grotesque angle.

Jack crouched motionless among the willows, reloading his gun. The rocky bench above was silent, but he was not lulled into believing the bandits had deserted. All was confusion aboard the stricken craft. Pain-hoarsened cries split the night. Men swarmed to the rail, peering into the bluff shadows. Jack counted four, and noted that they all carried pistols.

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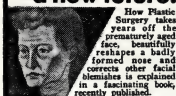
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One was jabbering, "Poor Ed Gilvill—the fireman. Gilvill is dead. Neck busted. Poor Ed Gilvill."

Another screamed, "My arm's busted, damn it. What the hell happened? Where's the captain?"

"Right here," a heavy voice broke in.

That voice grated savagely in Jack's ears. His eyes hardened to cold gray stone as he watched Dave Carter's massive torso lumber down the steps to the main deck amid a jumbled mess of broken crates and wool bags. Abruptly, he understood that Carter had been piloting the *Mallard*. It was Carter who had deliberately driven her into the rocks!

Dave Carter's voice boomed out in the manner of a man accustomed to giving the orders. "Rudder gear must have snapped. She flopped to the port side. I couldn't budge her. Hell of a mess. Fireman's dead, huh? Rest of you kickin'?"

"Four of us," one of the men said. "Where did that geezer go which was shootin' the lights and bellerin'?"

"Dunno," Carter rumbled. "Don't give a damn. The cuss must have been locoed. You four bozos mosey up to the light keeper's cabin and find out what the hell. Then find a hoss and get word somehow to Wallula or Dalles City to send another boat up here to salvage what we can. I'll stay here and watch things. She can't go much lower in this shaller water."

Seeming anxious to leave the wreck, the four men started to climb over the rail. Slow Jack straightened in the willow shadows. After his own desertion, he did not expect LeBrun's gang to live up to their promise of sparing the crewmen's lives. As soon as they topped the bluff, they would be mown down like hay.

He called out a loud warning. "Low bridge, men! It's a bushwhack!"

Startled, the *Mallard* crewmen scrambled back on deck. At the same instant, a booming storm of gun thunder exploded from the bench above. Jack saw one of the men stumble and go down. Others dived for the cover of scattered freight. A blistering stream of lead rattled on the *Mallard*'s boards. Dave Carter was out of sight, and Jack guessed he had ducked behind a bulkhead.

Guns began to bark from the *Mallard* deck as the crewmen fired back at LeBrun's

BUST 'ER-TO-HELL-AN'-GONE!

ambush gang. Watching intently, Jack saw that not all of the shooting on the boat was directed at LeBrun's party. Amazed, he saw red jets spitting from a boiler pit. The flashes were darting toward the *Mallard* crew members whose backs were turned toward the boiler room. Jack saw a man's body roll into sight and sprawl limply on the deck boards.

Somebody yelled hoarsely, "Captain! You gone crazy? You hit Jake, the purser!"

Only the snarl of the captain's sixgun replied. Another man cursed, dived for deeper protection.

Suddenly the entire puzzle dissolved in Jack's mind. He understood why Captain Dave Carter had rammed the *Mallard* into the rocks even though Jack had given him plenty of warning. The rudder had not broken. The cracking up was deliberate. Carter was secretly in league with Butch LeBrun's gang to rob the *Mallard's* gold cargo.

Undoubtedly, Carter carried insurance on the *Mallard's* full value, and cargo insurance as well. He would suffer nothing from the wreck except a dent in his reputation, which he could afford now that Jack Snow was no longer his chief river rival. At least half the proceeds from the gold cargo would find its way into Dave Carter's pocket while LeBrun's gang would split the remainder.

The scheming boat owner also had planned the jailbreak, Jack reasoned. He had secured LeBrun, Altcomp and Burke to execute it and to gain Jack's confidence. Things could be arranged to blame the boat wreck and subsequent robbery on Slow Jack Snow alone. But the *Mallard* crew members were not accomplices in the treacherous deal. Carter and LeBrun intended to murder them so there would be no leak in their thieving scheme.

A cold bitter anger intensified within Jack Snow. Warily, he angled along the bluff away from the boat, climbing higher.

He crawled over the sharp rock edge onto the flat bench. Bushes screened him from the moon, which had mounted the high south rimrocks and was blooming down full on the bench. The bandits were firing spasmodically at the boatmen. Jack advanced in silence.

All three renegades stretched flat on the rocks. They were shooting over the bluff

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edge, and the crackle of their guns echoed off the cliffs. Jack lined his gun barrel on the nearest dark shape he judged to be Chiloquin Burke.

"Call it quits, gang! Snow speaking. I got the deadwood on you."

LeBrun cursed, swiveled. "Blister the coyote," he yapped, and slammed a shot that whistled past Jack's ear.

MOTION filled the night. Chiloquin Burke switched ends like a cat, his gun a dark stripe in his hand. Jack triggered. As he dropped to his knees, he heard Burke's dying screech.

A slug slivered the muscles high along Jack's left arm. With clenched jaws, he drove a quick shot at Homer Altcomp. The ex-professor rolled against LeBrun as the stocky outlaw aimed for a sure shot.

Jarred by the collision, LeBrun's gun flamed. But the slug sailed weirdly over the willows.

"Damn you, Snow!" the renegade leader frothed. "I should have drilled you two hours ago."

Jack flung himself flat on the ground. LeBrun's next shot rimmed his shoulder blade. A fiery pain streak ran along his back. Jack aimed at the bandit's chest. He triggered three times.

Butch LeBrun uttered a choked gasp. His gun spilled from his fingers. Drowsily, he wilted on top of it.

Jack roused up, grimacing at the pain it cost him. He knelt beside a boulder, reloading his gun in feverish haste. The shooting on the Mallard had stopped. No crewmen were in sight, and Jack judged the ones still alive had wormed their way deep among the littered cargo to await Dave Carter.

Jack was considering his next move when a pistol roared from the willows behind him. A slug came out of the night and smashed into his side. It spun him half around and dropped him flat on the rocks.

He recognized Dave Carter's rumbling voice. "Take that, damn you, Snow!"

Jack landed facing the gunman as another red spear scratched a vivid mark in the night. The slug zizzed a scant inch above Jack's head. He instantly sensed what had happened. While the gun scrape was raging on the bench, Dave Carter had sneaked off the boat and climbed the bluff.

BUST-'ER-TO-HELL-AN'-GONE!

"I'm not done yet, Carter," Jack gritted.

He whipped a shot into the night that drove the beefy pilot deeper into the willows. Then another. Carter's gun roared back at him. Sand and pebbles sprayed his face. He blinked, shot again at the dark mass within the bushes.

He listened to the grunted curse of pain and rage that told him he had connected. He aimed a foot higher, and triggered again as flame slashed out from Carter's pistol throat.

Boots threshed the willows. Dave Carter's big body rolled out into the moonlight.

"Snow, you—" His voice trailed to a half-cough, half-curse. One last convulsive kick, and he lay still.

Slow Jack Snow climbed unsteadily to his feet. He had a smashed rib, he guessed, but nothing more serious. He called out to the *Mallard* boathands. After a cautious interval, two men crawled from the mass of freight. When they reached the beach, Jack was examining the bandits.

Dave Carter, Butch LeBrun and Chiloquin Burke were stone dead. But Homer Altcomp was returning to consciousness and was able to talk in a wheezy voice.

"You're a fighting man, Captain Snow. We underestimated you. As I pass on to the next world, I leave you the gold—the rich gold—when I all but had it."

"Hang the gold," Jack said. "These two *Mallard* hands want to know what got into Dave Carter. Talk, professor. Ease your conscience while you can."

"Ah, yes," the studious robber agreed. "It is well that I do so before I pierce the veil. It all began when Captain Carter lured

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"Then Carter hired you and Burke and LeBrun to sneak me out of the jug?"

Altcomp's eyelids fluttered. His voice grew weaker, but he clung to life with an iron effort. "True. Dave intended to wreck the Mallard here at the Chute. Like LeBrun said, we were to exterminate the Mallard crew. And you at—the same time, Captain. The gold would be ours."

"Later, Dave could tell the sheriff that he had managed to sneak away when his crew was shot down in cold blood by Captain Snow. Then he found LeBrun, Burke and myself camped nearby. We returned to the Mallard and found Captain Snow absconding with the last sack of gold. He resisted and we were forced to annihilate him. The presence of Snow's body would clear Carter of any suspicion. Since Snow's knowledge of the river is as well-established as his hatred for Carter, we would have a perfect scapegoat, to say nothing of an airtight alibi for Carter, the only other riverman involved, who had the experience to maneuver the job."

"Nobody would have discovered the bulk of the gold. But people would think Captain Snow concealed it in some secret cache nearby. Buried treasure. A—a myth for—" Homer Altcomp stopped talking abruptly. His body went limp.

Turning to the crewmen, Jack asked "You heard what Altcomp said?"

They nodded. One of them said, "Every word. Our testimony will clear you at the retrial, Captain Snow. And our personal thanks go to you for saving our bacon."

Slow Jack Snow walked away. Somehow, his throat felt too husky for words. He gazed out over the moon-glazed waters. Ageless, changeless, forever rushing toward the sea were those gray glacier waters of the swift Columbia, the river that was his home.

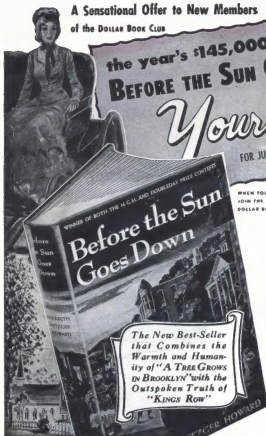
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